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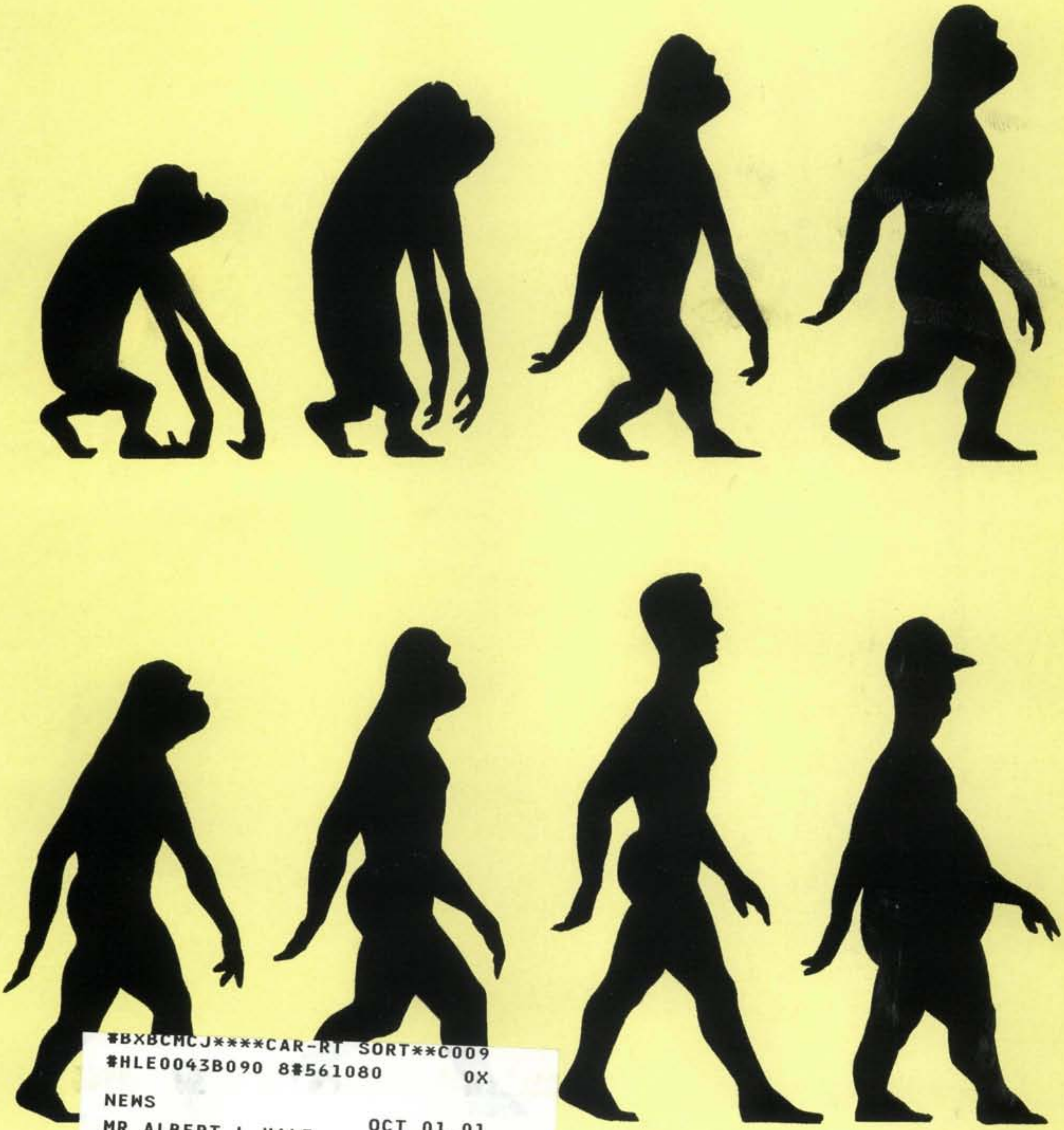
THE NEW YORKER



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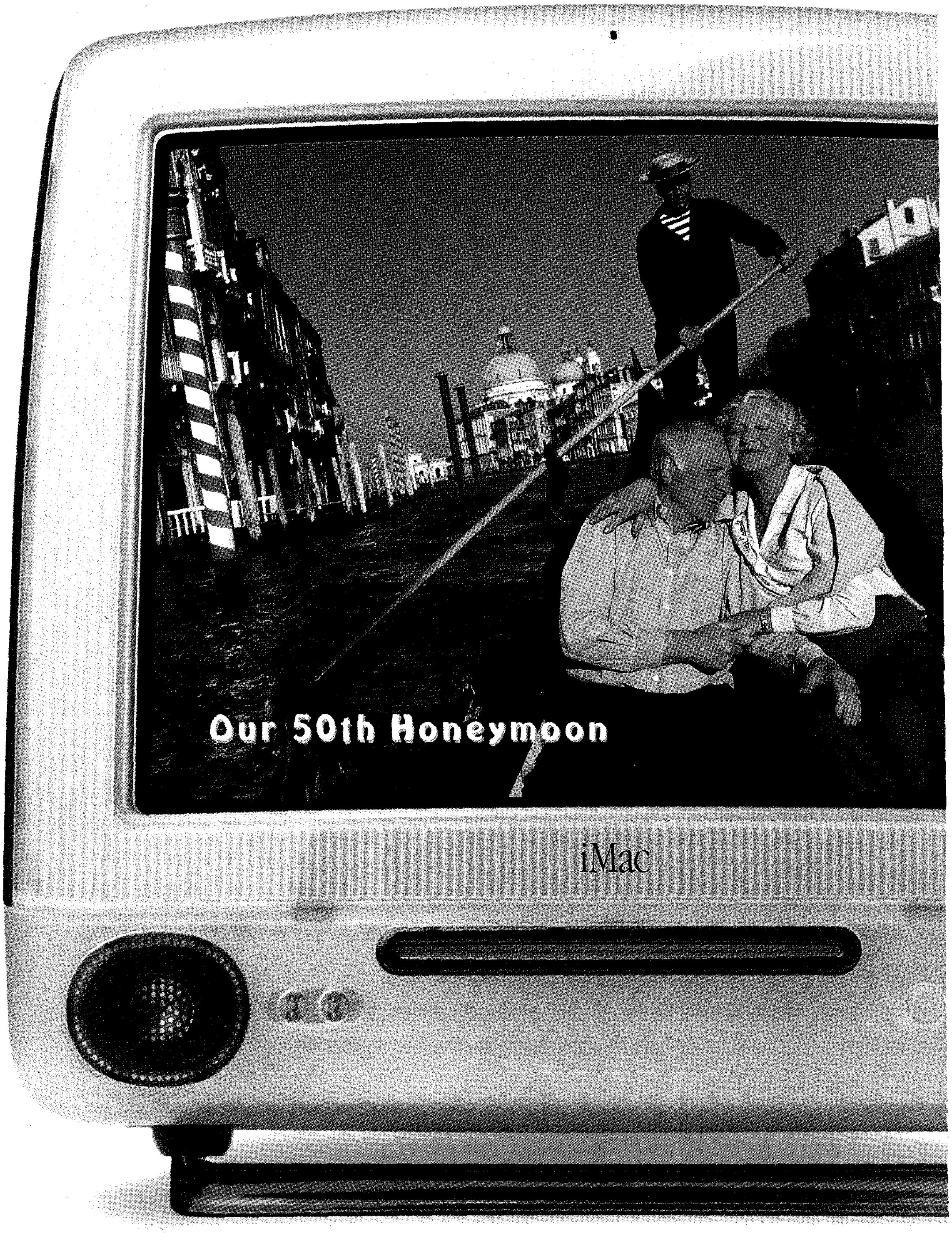
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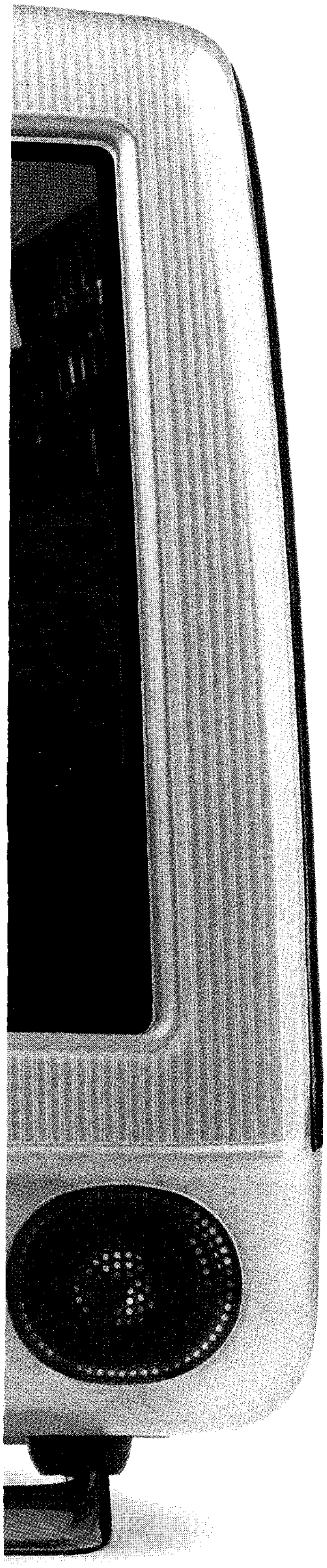

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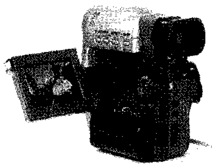

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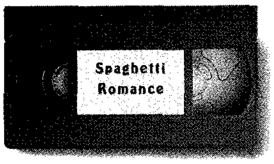

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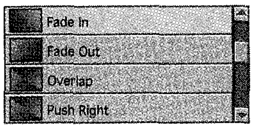

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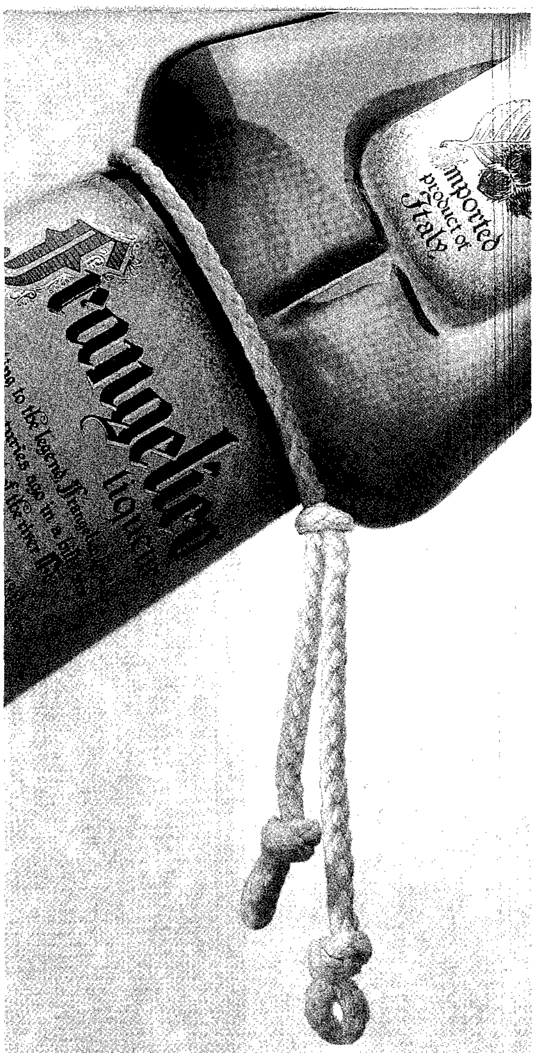

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THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 13, 2000

6 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
29 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Bob Jones; Clinton's two dinners.

Joe Klein 36 THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL
Kamikaze
Those self-destructing Republicans.

Bruce McCall 40 SHOUTS & MURMURS
Who Wants to Keep His Job?

Dagoberto Gilb 42 PERSONAL HISTORY
I Knew She Was Beautiful
The author remembers his mother.

Malcolm Gladwell 52 ANNALS OF MEDICINE
John Rock's Error
Science reconsiders menstruation.

Elizabeth Kolbert 58 SHOWCASE
March from Selma

David Owen 64 PROFILES
Taking Humor Seriously
George Meyer, the funniest man in TV.

Lois Long 71 TAKES
On and Off the Avenue

Sherman Alexie 76 FICTION
"Indian Country"

THE CRITICS

Anthony Lane 84 AT THE MUSEUMS
Walker Evans's photographs

Nicholas Lemann 92 BOOKS
Three views of New Orleans

97 BRIEFLY NOTED

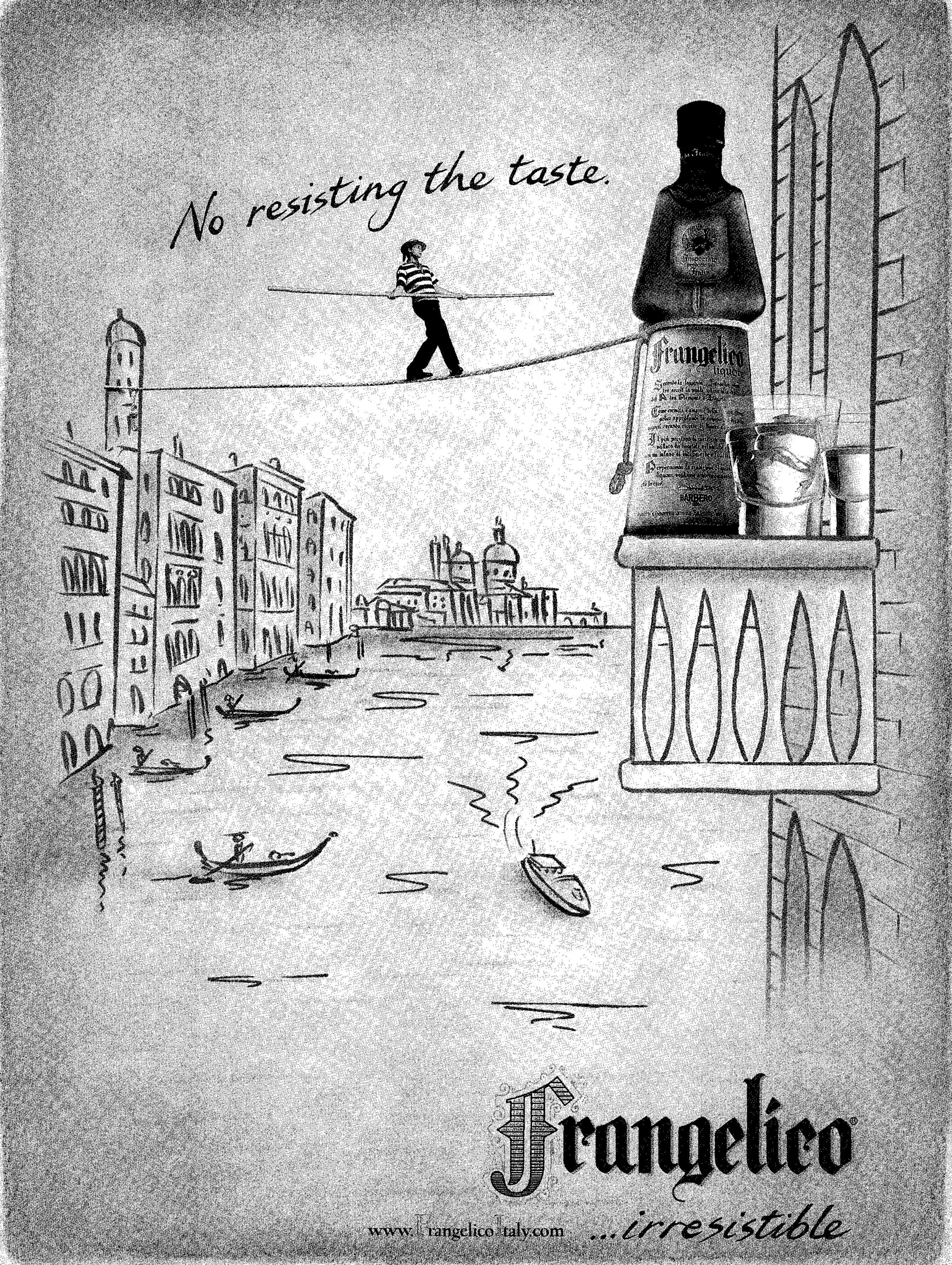
Peter Schjeldahl 98 THE ART WORLD
Sol LeWitt's Minimalism

David Denby 100 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"Boiler Room," "What Planet Are You From?"

POEMS

Kenneth Koch 46 "To My Fifties"
Debora Greger 56 "Poetry and Sleep"

COVER *"Time Marches On," by Ian Falconer* THE BACK PAGE *"Portraitgate," by Jules Feiffer* DRAWINGS *Robert Mankoff, William Hamilton, Barbara Smaller, Alex Gregory, Michael Maslin, Tom Hachtman, Robert Weber, Roz Chast, Donald Reilly, Matthew Diffee, Michael Crawford, David Sipress, George Booth, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Danny Shanahan, Charles Barsotti, Frank Cotham, Pat Byrnes, John O'Brien, Mischa Richter, William Haefeli*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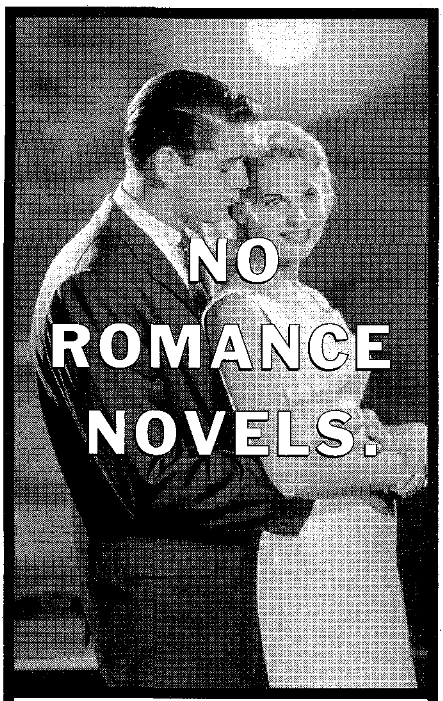

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Malcolm Gladwell ("John Rock's Error," p. 52) is the author of "The Tipping Point," which came out this month. An archive of his *New Yorker* articles is available at gladwell.com.

David Owen ("Taking Humor Seriously," p. 64) has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 1991. His books include "The Making of the Masters."

Sherman Alexie (Fiction, p. 76) has published eight books of poems, a collection of stories, and two novels, "Reservation Blues" and "Indian Killer."

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Dagoberto Gilb ("I Knew She Was Beautiful," p. 42) has a new collection of stories, "Woodcuts of Women," which is due out next winter.

Nicholas Lemann (Books, p. 92) is a *New Yorker* staff writer. His most recent book is "The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy."

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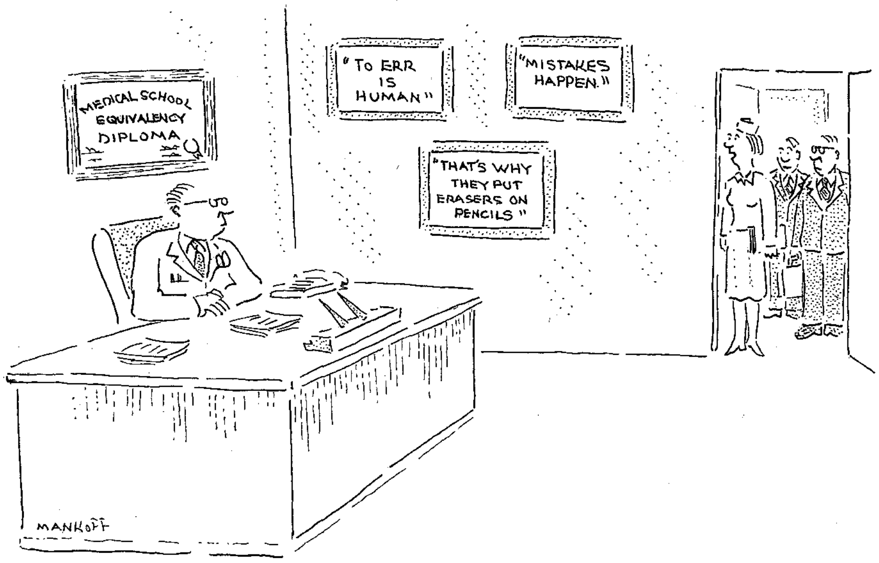
Jules Feiffer (The Back Page, p. 102) is the author, most recently, of the children's book "Bark, George."

Lois Long (Takes, p. 71) joined *The New Yorker* in its first year. She was the magazine's fashion editor for more than four decades, until her death, in 1974. ♦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THE MAIL

INSIDE DOPE

I'd like to add a postscript to Hendrik Hertzberg's February 7th Comment about the futile War on Drugs. In 1998, Dr. David Satcher, the Surgeon General, estimated the annual number of deaths in the United States due to tobacco-related diseases to be four hundred thousand. In 1996, according to the National Safety Council, a public-policy group, the total number of deaths in this country caused by opiates and other narcotics was 2,075. Thus, politicians cannot be seriously worried about the hazards of drug use. There must be another reason for locking up hundreds of thousands of people—disproportionately black and Hispanic—for nonviolent, victimless "crimes."

Marvin Mandell
W. Roxbury, Mass.

PUPPY LOVE

In his tribute to Charles Schulz, "Abstract Thought Is a Warm Puppy" (February 14th), Art Spiegelman asks, "How did 'Peanuts' consistently depict genuine pain and loss and still keep everything so warm and fuzzy?" The answer, I think, is that the "Peanuts" characters had the same relationship to their creator as Schulz is reputed to have had with his. Schulz depicted his characters' weaknesses with honesty and immense love. In so doing, he mirrored the God he felt knows us intimately and loves us endlessly.

Elizabeth Cortell
Chicago, Ill.

LIBERTÉ, ÉGALITÉ, PATERNITÉ

Adam Gopnik's memoir about the birth of his daughter in France ("Like a King," January 31st) recalled my own experience forty-three years ago, when my daughter Linda was born at the American Hospital in Neuilly. I was ordered to present myself at the Neuilly town hall within forty-eight hours to register her birth. Owing to a rush at work, I didn't show up until some sixty hours later. The clerk informed me that I was in violation of the Napoleonic Code, which prescribes the forty-eight-hour limit to insure an acknowledgment of paternity by the presumed father. He advised me that in due course I would be subpoenaed to answer this charge, and incidentally mentioned that "Linda" did not figure on the Calendar of Saints, from which names should properly be chosen.

In the Parisian suburb where my wife and I lived with our children, we were accustomed to the monthly visit of a letter carrier with the children's stipend, paid into the hand of their mother—in cash. After Linda's birth, he pointed out that the allowance had been increased to cover our newborn, as yet unacknowledged. "Madame," he proclaimed proudly, "the laws of France do not discriminate in child support between legitimate and illegitimate offspring."

When the subpoena arrived, my wife and I reported to the chambers of the examining magistrate, who opened our folder and warned, "You must realize that denying paternity is a grave offense." I explained the reason for my twelve-hour tardiness in registering the birth. The judge then said he would open an investigation at which the attending obstetrician and nurses would be interrogated, and that we would be informed of his decision.

At last, several months later, a four-page document, embossed with the seal of the French Republic, arrived. It recited in detail the circumstances of the case and commanded the Mayor of Neuilly to inscribe the name of my daughter in the margin of the register of births. Failing which, this unique birth certificate concluded, "the land, sea and air forces of the French Republic are called upon to enforce this judgment."

David N. Leff
Framingham, Mass.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number to "The Mail," The New Yorker, 4 Times Square, New York, N.Y. 10036. They can also be faxed to 212-286-5047 or sent via E-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS & PREVIEWS

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AIDA
A musical based on the Verdi opera. With music by Elton John, lyrics by Tim Rice, and a book by Linda Woolverton and David Henry Hwang. Robert Falls is the director. In previews. (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4747.)

AMERICAN BUFFALO
William H. Macy leads the cast in an Atlantic Theatre Company staging of David Mamet's 1975 play. In previews. (336 W. 20th St. 239-6200.)

BIRDSEED BUNDLES
Lola Pashalinski and Valda Setterfield are in the cast of Ain Gordon's latest play. Previews March 9-10. Opens March 11 at 8 and runs through April 2. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 924-0077.)

AN EMPTY PLATE AT THE CAFÉ DU GRAND BOEUF
John Rando is the director of this comedy by Michael Hollinger, in which a restaurateur goes on a hunger strike. Opens March 8 at 7. (Primary Stages, 354 W. 45th St. 333-4052.)

LAS HORAS DE BELEN: A BOOK OF HOURS
A Mabou Mines adaptation of poems by Catherine Sasanov. March 9-12 at 8:30. Continues through March 26. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288.)

HOUSE ARREST
Anna Deavere Smith's latest one-woman show, in which she explores the office of the President of the United States. In previews. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 239-6200.)

THE MOMENT WHEN
A new play by James Lapine, starring Illeana Douglas, Phyllis Newman, and Mark Ruffalo. In previews through March 11. Opens March 12 at 7 and runs through March 26. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN
Cherry Jones and Gabriel Byrne star in O'Neill's 1943 drama, under the direction of Daniel Sullivan. In previews. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200.)

1953
The British poet Craig Raine's modern verse adaptation of Racine's "Andromache" reimagines a Europe in which Hitler has won the Second World War. Opens March 8 at 8 and runs through March 19. (Grove Street Playhouse, 39 Grove St. 877-568-0359.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
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PEARL THEATRE COMPANY
Presenting repertory performances of the Oresteia and Congreve's "The Way of the World." In previews. (80 St. Marks Pl. 598-9802.)

RIVERDANCE
The Irish troupe of dancers, singers, and musicians comes to Broadway. In previews. (Gershwin, 51st St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

TRUE WEST
Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly star in Sam Shepard's 1980 play, under the direction of Matthew Warchus. Two previws on March 8. Opens March 9 at 6:30. (Circle in the Square, 50th St. west of Broadway. 239-6200.)

WASTE
Harley Granville-Barker's 1907 drama about a Tory sex scandal. In previews through March 11. Opens March 12 at 6:30. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)

THE WAVERLY GALLERY
Eileen Heckart portrays an aging Greenwich Village art dealer who must give up her gallery, in a new play by Kenneth Lonergan. In previews. (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 239-6200.)

THE WILD PARTY
Joseph Moncure March's Jazz Age poem is the basis for Michael John LaChiusa and George C. Wolfe's new musical, starring Mandy Patinkin, Eartha Kitt, and Toni Collette. With music by Mr. LaChiusa. Mr. Wolfe is the director. Previews begin March 10. (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 239-6200.)

OPENED RECENTLY

THE ALCHEMIST
Dan Castellaneta leads the cast in the Classic Stage Company's staging of Ben Jonson's 1610 comedy. (136 E. 13th St. 677-4210, ext. 2. Closes March 12.)

THE ALTRUISTS
A new comedy from Nicky Silver, starring Veanne Cox and Sam Robards. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 353-0303.)

AMADEUS
From London, a revival of Peter Shaffer's drama, starring Michael Sheen as Mozart and David Suchet as Salieri. Sir Peter Hall is the director. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

ANCESTRAL VOICES
A staged reading, with a rotating cast, of A. R. Gurney's play, in which a Buffalo grandmother disrupts her family when she divorces her husband to marry his best friend. Sundays at 7:30 and Mondays at 8. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

ARMS AND THE MAN
A Roundabout Theatre production of Shaw's 1894 play, under the direction of Roger Rees. (Gramercy, 127 E. 23rd St. 777-4900.)

BAD BOY NIETZSCHE
Richard Foreman's forty-seventh play. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 533-4650.)

THE BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS
In this exuberant take on "The Comedy of Errors," the action has been shifted to a hip-hop realm, but the basic ideas remain the same. Like the Shakespeare original, "Bomb-Itty" is witty, lewd, allusive, and chaotic, and it plays fast and loose with stereotypes, but the four extravagantly talented writer-actors (who play all of the parts) make it seem altogether new. (45 Bleecker, 45 Bleecker St., at Lafayette St. 307-4100.)

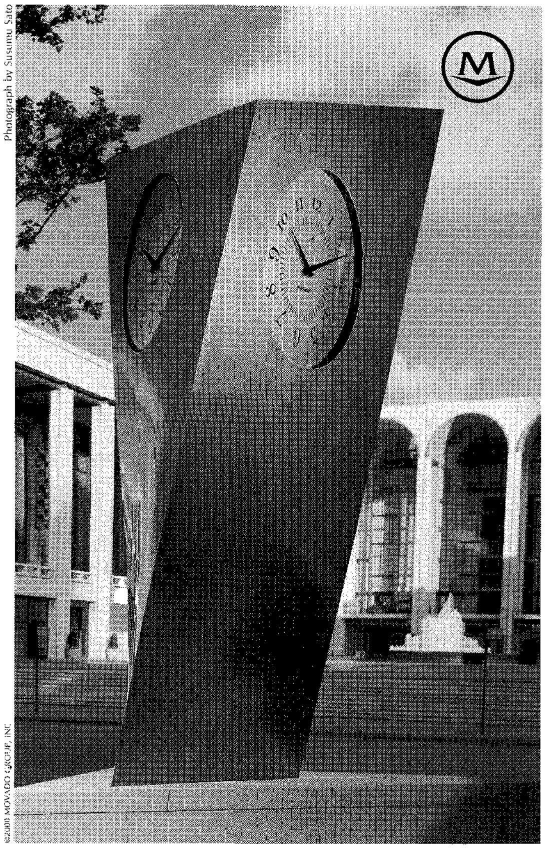
CONTACT
The director and choreographer Susan Stroman's dance play has reopened at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre. A triptych of simple stories about the various forms of human connection and the atmosphere of longing, it's a big-hearted, witty crowd-pleaser. (Reviewed in our issue of 10/18-25/99.) (Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

THE COUNTRY BOY
A young Irishman returns home after fifteen years in America, in a drama by John Murphy. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 727-2737.)

DAME EDNA: THE ROYAL TOUR
Former housewife turned international entertainer Dame Edna Everage (the sublime comic creation of the Australian Dadaist and dandy Barry Humphries) is, to adopt her penchant for alliteration, a virago of vitriol, a harpy of happiness, a megastar of maliciousness. (11/1/99) (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

DINNER WITH FRIENDS
Donald Margulies's new play is a perceptive depiction of the mystery and the mundanity of marriage, and the cast give well-rounded performances. (Variety Arts, 110 Third Ave., at 14th St. 239-6200.)

THE DIRECTOR
Through the character of a theatre director who tries to find truth by playing abusive mind games with everyone he knows, the playwright Nancy Hasty asks whether acting (which is essentially lying) can reveal deeper truth. It's a smart play, more grounded than it might sound, and, though it's not entirely satisfying intellectually, John Shea's brilliant performance as the director almost makes it seem so. Tasha Lawrence, as an aspiring playwright, is equally good. (Arclight, 152 W. 71st St. 279-4200.)



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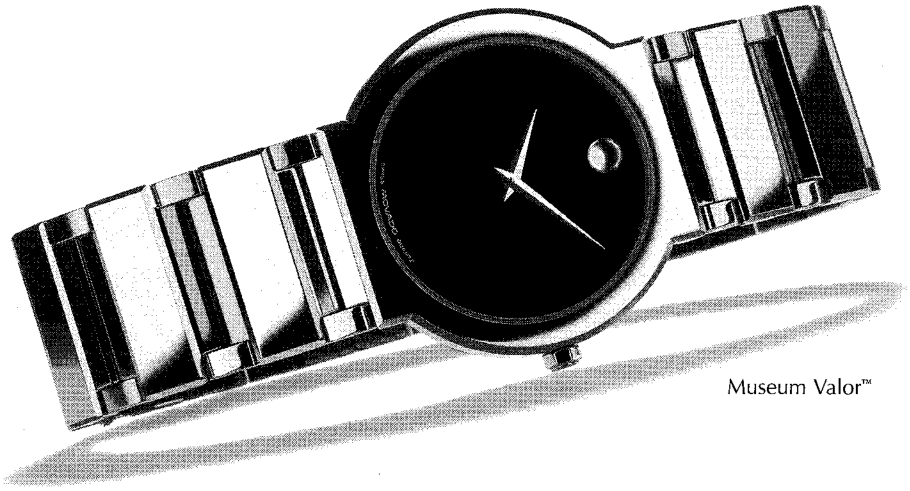

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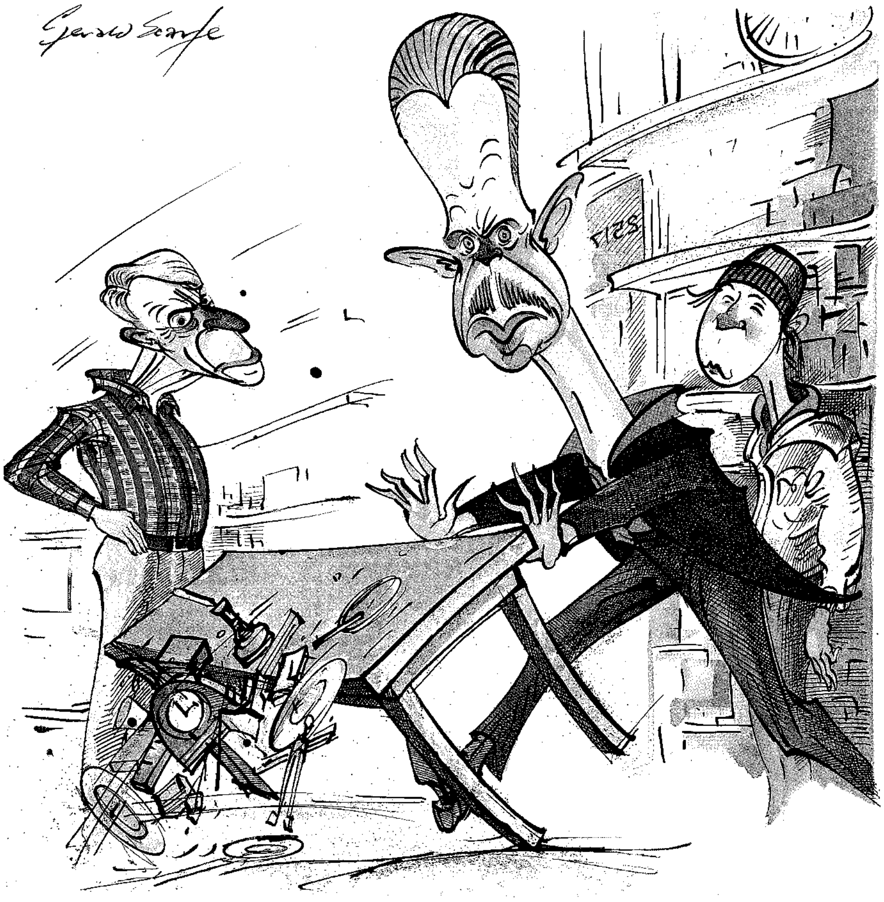


Philip Baker Hall, William H. Macy, and Mark Webber, in "American Buffalo."

ENOUGH ABOUT ME: AN UNAUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF VARLA JEAN MERMAN
The alleged love child of Ernest Borgnine and Ethel Merman shares songs and stories from her painful life. (Chelsea Playhouse, 125 W. 22nd St. 307-4100.)

FUDDY MEERS
There is such a thing as inspired nonsense, but don't look for it in David Lindsay-Abaire's comedy, which is an exemplar of expired nonsense. The play relies heavily on handicap humor: one of the characters is blind in one eye, and has a limp, a lisp, and an ear that's a "twisted mass of burnt scar tissue"; another has garbled speech as a result of a stroke; another is—ha ha ha—dyslexic. The excellent cast, featuring J. Smith-Cameron, Robert Stanton, John Christopher Jones, and Patrick Breen, makes the most of what cleverness the play does contain; nonetheless, you may leave the theatre with the feeling that you just attended a Helen Keller-joke marathon. (3/6/00) (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, east of Sixth Ave., between W. 3rd and Bleecker Sts. 307-4100.)

FULLY COMMITTED
In this hilarious one-man comedy, Mark Setlock plays a lovable reservations clerk at an unnamed tony Manhattan restaurant, who deals with the daily deluge of calls from dying-to-be-guests. (Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce St. 239-6200.)

JACKIE MASON: MUCH ADO ABOUT EVERYTHING
The comic is back on Broadway with a new show. (Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

JAMES JOYCE'S THE DEAD
Playwrights Horizons' musical version of the short story. (11/8/99) (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

KISS ME, KATE
With all its admirable expertise and its various delights, this production of the Cole Porter musical is oddly earthbound: it comes down to the vexing issue of chemistry. The leads, Marin Mazzie and Brian Stokes Mitchell, are expert players, but they are not—in the true meaning of the words—star performers. (11/29/99) (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

LETTERS FROM CUBA
The Signature Theatre Company's final production in its Maria Irene Fornes season. (555 W. 42nd St. 244-7529. Closes March 12.)

SATURDAY NIGHT
Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and the lyrics for this show forty-five years ago, when he was twenty-five, but it is only now having its New York première. Set in Brooklyn in the twenties, it's about a group of young men and women caught up in the classic struggle between love and money. (Love wins, natch.) The book, by Julius J. Epstein, is pure corn, but Sondheim's work tranforms it into delicious popcorn; his wise, funny lyrics in particular make this musical much more than a mere curiosity. Under the direction of Kathleen Marshall, the good cast brings out the shine on the show's shoes. (3/6/00) (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
The musical, based on the 1977 film. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

SPLENDORA
A man returns to his Texas home town disguised as a woman, in a musical by Peter Webb, Stephen Hoffman, and Mark Campbell. (Chelsea Playhouse, 125 W. 22nd St. 307-4100.)

SQUONK
The multimedia performance piece has moved to Broadway. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

SUEÑO
MCC Theatre presents a new translation, by José Rivera, of the Calderón de la Barca drama "Life Is a Dream." (120 W. 28th St. 727-7765. Closes March 19.)

TAKING A CHANCE ON LOVE
A musical revue about the life and work of the late, overlooked lyricist John Latouche, staged by the York Theatre Company. (Theatre at St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 239-6200. Closes March 26.)

SWING!
A musical salute to the genre, directed and choreographed by Lynne Taylor-Corbett. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

THE TALE OF THE ALLERGIST'S WIFE
Charles Busch's new comedy, about an antidote to midlife malaise, stars Linda Lavin, Michele Lee, and Tony Roberts. (Manhattan Theatre Club, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

TRIPTYCH
A gay couple breaks up and experiments with other sexual arrangements, in a comedy by Richard Willett. (Homegrown Theatre, Broadway at 99th St. 229-7500. Closes March 18.)

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES
Eve Ensler's one-woman show is now being performed by a rotating three-woman cast. There's a certain amount of shtick involved, but most of the stories are touching and memorable. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.)

WAITING IN THE WINGS
In the best of Noël Coward's postwar plays, old gallant theatricals duke it out in a retirement home, where they fire off some terrific one-liners. Although the play itself is somewhat creaky, the pros who bring it to life here aren't: Bette Henritze, Elizabeth Wilson, Rosemary Harris, Dana Ivey, and the evergreen Lauren Bacall. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

THE WILD PARTY
A musical by Andrew Lippa, based on the 1928 poem by Joseph Moncure March. Gabriel Barre is the director. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

WOYZECK
The Axis Theatre Company's version of Büchner's unfinished play. (One Sheridan Sq., near Seventh Ave. 807-9300.)

LONG RUNS

ANNIE GET YOUR GUN
Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 307-4747.

BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES
Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370.

CABARET
Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200.

CATS
Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 239-6200.

CHICAGO
Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

DE LA GUARDA
Daryl Roth, 20 Union Sq. E., at 15th St. 239-6200.

THE FANTASTICKS
Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St., at Bleecker St. 674-3838.

FOOTLOOSE
Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 307-4100.

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY
Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200.

FOSSE
Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH
Jane Street Theatre, Hotel Riverview Ballroom, 113 Jane St. 239-6200.

I LOVE YOU, YOU'RE PERFECT, NOW CHANGE
Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.

JEKYLL & HYDE
Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

LATE-NITE CATECHISM
St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200.

THE LION KING
New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.

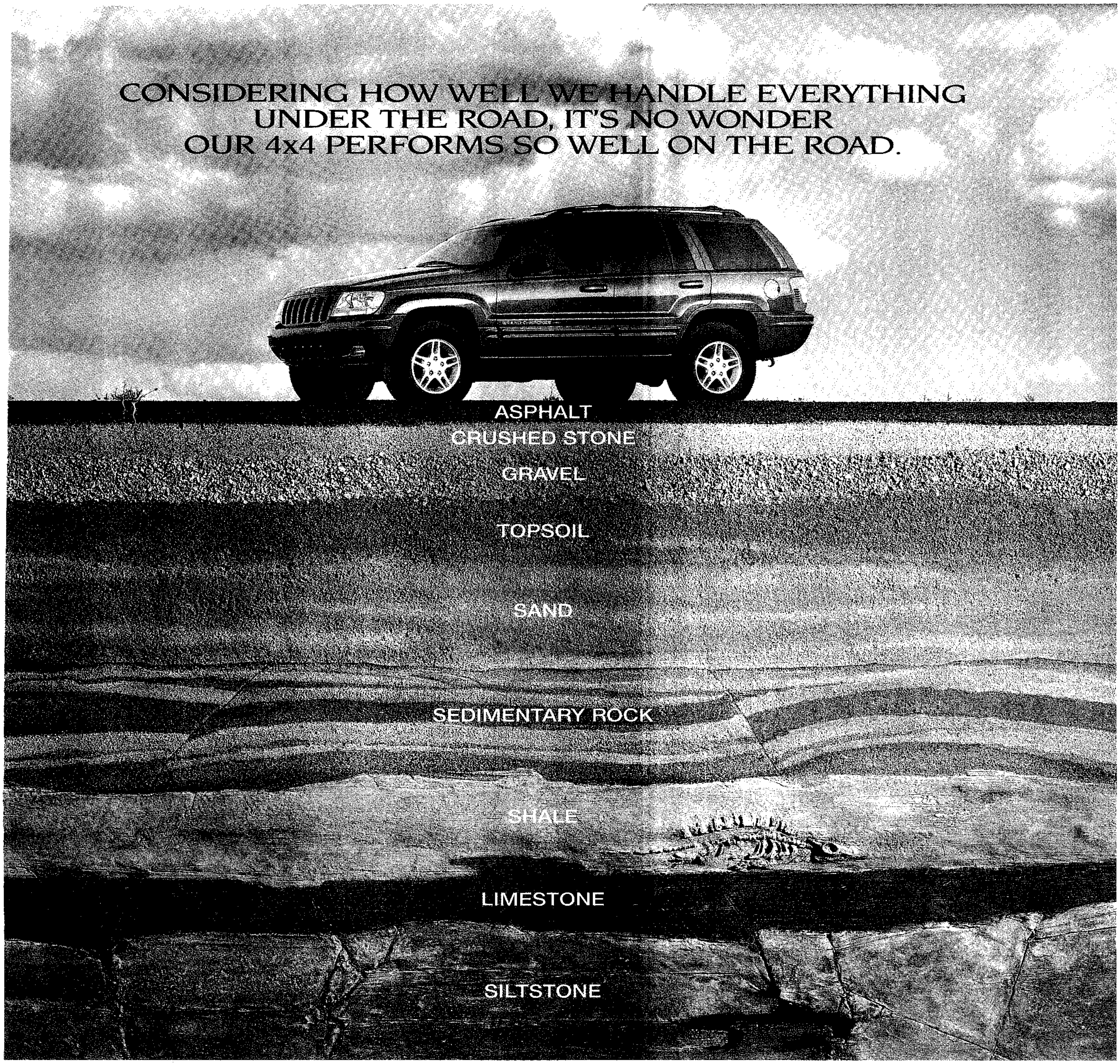
LES MISÉRABLES
Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

MISS SAIGON
Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 239-6200.

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS
John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.

PERFECT CRIME
Duffy, 1553 Broadway, at 46th St. 695-3401.

GERALD SCARFE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NEW YORK
Philharmonic
KURT MASUR, MUSIC DIRECTOR

THU MAR 23 8:00PM
FRI MAR 24 2:00PM
SAT MAR 25 2:00PM
TUE MAR 28 7:30PM

Valery Gergiev CONDUCTOR
Philip Myers HORN

Hindemith: Horn Concerto

Tchaikovsky: *Manfred* Symphony

The dynamic Kirov Opera Director Valery Gergiev leads Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony, a dramatic portrait of Lord Byron's tragic romantic hero. Principal hornist Philip Myers brings sheer poetry to Hindemith's Horn Concerto.

Valery Gergiev

Deborah Voigt seizes two dramatic roles

THU APR 13 8:00PM
FRI APR 14 8:00PM
SAT APR 15 8:00PM

Kurt Masur CONDUCTOR
Deborah Voigt SOPRANO

Rachmaninoff: *Isle of the Dead*

Barber: *Andromache's Farewell,* for Soprano and Orchestra

Britten: Four Sea Interludes from *Peter Grimes*

R. Strauss: Final Scene from *Salome*

Deborah Voigt displays the breadth of her vocal gifts in two contrasting works. Barber's tortuous, circling themes evoke the anguish of the Greek heroine Andromache bidding farewell to her son; then, Ms.Voigt seizes the ghoulish desire for John the Baptist's head in the biblical tale of Salome.

Deborah Voigt

For info. call (212) 875-5656. 3/23-3/28: $18-77; Fri. Mat: $16-64; Sat. Mat: $14-54; 4/13-4/15: $22-82. The Saturday Matinee concerts are made possible through a gift from The Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, with additional support from the William H. Kearns Foundation and Philip Morris Companies Inc. PHOTOS: GERGIEV/CAMI, VOIGT/DEVON CASS.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

RENT
Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 921-8000.

STOMP
Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at St. Marks Pl. 477-2477.

TONY N' TINA'S WEDDING
St. Luke's Church, 308 W. 46th St. 239-6200.

WIT
Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 307-4100.

DANCE

PAUL TAYLOR DANCE COMPANY
March 7 at 8 and March 12 at 7:30: "Aureole," "Big Bertha," "Syzygy," and "Company B." ♦ March 8 and March 10 at 8 and March 11 at 2: "Sunset," "Arabesque," and "Esplanade." ♦ March 9 and March 11 at 8 and March 12 at 3: "Cascade," "Lost, Found, and Lost," and "Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rehearsal)." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

COMPAÑIA VICENTE SÁEZ
The Valencia-based troupe presents an evening-length work, "Fenix" ("Phoenix"), which matches ecstatic dancing (Sáez's update of, among other influences, North African religious dance) with a percussion score by Amores. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. March 7-11 at 8 and March 12 at 2 and 7:30.)

"OUT OF BREATH"
The choreographer Kyle de Camp uses F.B.I. transcripts, interviews, film clips, and other primary sources for an evening-length one-woman show (with d.j.) that follows New Wave hottie Jean Seberg, who moved from the lead in Otto Preminger's "Saint Joan" to a supporting role with the Black Panthers. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 255-5893. March 8 at 8 and March 9-11 at 10. Through March 18.)

"KINESTHETIC CHRONICLES"
The choreographers Robert Arthur Altman and Gabriele Kroos split a program, which includes Altman's "Thither & Thrice," set to a score for voices and cardboard tubes, and Kroos's "My Favorite Sixties Girl," which looks at Factory regular Edie Sedgwick. (Merce Cunningham Studios, 55 Bethune St. 924-0077. March 9-10 at 9 and March 11-12 at 8.)

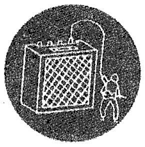
FESTIVAL OF GREEK MUSIC AND DANCE
March 10 at 8: "Music of Epirus," featuring the Halkias family, with Petroulakas on the clarinet, supported by his brother Achileas (on the violin) and son Babis (second clarinet), in the polyphonic music of Epirus. ♦ March 11 at 8: Visilis Skoulas and the all-male Anogia Dance Ensemble perform traditional dances of Crete. ♦ March 12 at 8: Maryo and the Tambourlika Ensemble (violin, oud, bouzouki, *santouri*, *kanonaki*, etc.) perform a selection of *rembetika*, a form that has been called the "Greek blues." (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400.)

WENDY OSSERMAN DANCE
The eight-member troupe performs two new works, "Portrait of a Daughter," whose movements came from descriptions offered by the mothers of company members, and "Sectors." (Washington Square Church, 135 W. 4th St. 206-0102. March 8-11 at 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
CONCERTS

"ROY HAYNES JAZZ PARTY"
Roy Haynes, who, along with Max Roach and Elvin Jones, is one of the big three of still-active pioneers of modern jazz drumming, turns seventy-five this year. Recent appearances, and an upcoming trio recording, give evidence that his technique, drive, and imagination remain undiminished. His sizzling ride cymbal and snapping snare could power a small Midwestern city, let alone a band. His group is joined here by the Kyle Eastwood quintet and the Manhattan School of Music Jazz Orchestra. (Pace Downtown Theatre, Spruce St. between Nassau and Gold Sts. 346-1715. March 9 at 8.)

ROCK NOTES



OLDER THAN THAT NOW
Becoming a rock celebrity isn't always a wise career decision; most stars burn out or fade away on cue, as if in the clutches of the popular cliché. A few, though, manage to keep shining.

For Marianne Faithfull, just being alive is an achievement, given the years of drug abuse which helped transform her from a glamour girl of late-sixties London to a weathered, supremely world-weary balladeer. Faithfull returns to pop writing and singing with **"Vagabond Ways"** (Instinct), but a Faithfull pop record isn't a typical pop record. The title track offers an offhanded, even prosy, catalogue of sins ("I drink and I take drugs; I love sex and I move around a lot") before sliding into an irresistible chorus, "Yes, I guess I do have vagabond ways." Elsewhere, there are bitter half-sung monologues and rare moments of grace—the same combination that energized Faithfull's landmark 1979 album, "Broken English"—along with a perversely cheerful cover of Leonard Cohen's "Tower of Song."

Patti Smith's last two releases have sometimes sounded like public therapy, her attempt to work through the trauma of her husband's and her brother's deaths, in 1994. Her new album, **"Gung Ho"** (Arista), is another matter entirely. Up-tempo numbers like "Boy Cried Wolf" and "Persuasion" showcase slashing vocals and brawny guitars, while the more contemplative tracks play like secular plainsong. As she has aged, Smith has learned to move beyond Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and (Tom) Verlaine; the folkie "Libbie's Song" was inspired by General Custer's widow, and the final track is a hallucinatory eleven-minute hymn about Ho Chi Minh.

While Smith has recaptured her early authority, Alex Chilton has surrendered his. After fronting the Box Tops, Chilton enjoyed power-pop renown with Big Star. But his solo career has been deeply unsatisfying, marked by periods of alcohol abuse and rackety records. **"Set"** (Bar/None) proves that Chilton's sloppiness is more an aesthetic than an accident. Recorded in a single night, the album finds Chilton and his trio running through a group of obscure soul and jazz numbers. Fortunately, the junkyard atmospherics are charming; in the oddest songs, such as "Oogum Boogum" and "You's a Viper," Chilton becomes a kind of ragged archivist, still in love with the music that moved him decades ago.

—*Ben Greenman*

BILLY BRAGG
The world's most entertaining socialist has a commanding onstage presence marked by droll banter and his heartfelt original songs. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 864-5400. March 9 at 8.)

THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND
The front end of a thirteen-night stand with the boys from Macon, who, when they started out in 1969, already seemed like a troop of battle-scarred veterans. Before anyone even unfurled the Southern-rock banner, they were working through complex jams that gesture toward blues and jazz. Despite the periodic feuding, splinter groups, and devastating deaths, these grizzled midnight riders are still soldiering on. (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. 496-7070. March 9-11 and March 13-14, all at 8.)

PABLO ZIEGLER
Astor Piazzolla's former pianist leads an evening of tango music. (Proshansky Auditorium, City University of New York Graduate Center, Fifth Ave. at 34th St. 817-8215. March 10 at 7:30.)

BRUCE COCKBURN
Over the past thirty years, the folkie Canadian rocker has lent his gritty passion and fierce intelligence to matters both personal and political. His

latest release, "Breakfast in New Orleans, Dinner in Timbuktu," benefits from the support of Margo Timmins and Lucinda Williams. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. March 10 at 8.)

PRETENDERS
She may be forty-eight years old, but Chrissie Hynde remains the archetypal rock chick (her liner notes to the band's 1994 album, "Last of the Independents," are a virtual manifesto on the subject). Hynde, an Akron, Ohio, native, went to England in the seventies, where she landed a job in Malcolm McLaren's London boutique, Sex, and discovered that the anarchy of punk rock could accommodate her classy, mannered alto. After two decades of records, some great and some merely good, her voice is one of the most immediately recognizable sounds in pop music. With the up-and-coming Irish singer-songwriter Paddy Casey. (Roseland, 239 W. 52nd St. 307-7171. March 10 at 8.)

THE FORT APACHE BAND
The Fort Apache Band grafts its steaming Latin sensibility onto Coltrane-era modal vamps; leader Jerry Gonzalez is a virtuoso conga player and a steadily maturing trumpeter, and his brother Andy is the most prominent bassist on the Latin-jazz scene. (Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, 58 Seventh Ave., Brooklyn. 718-622-3300. March 11 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

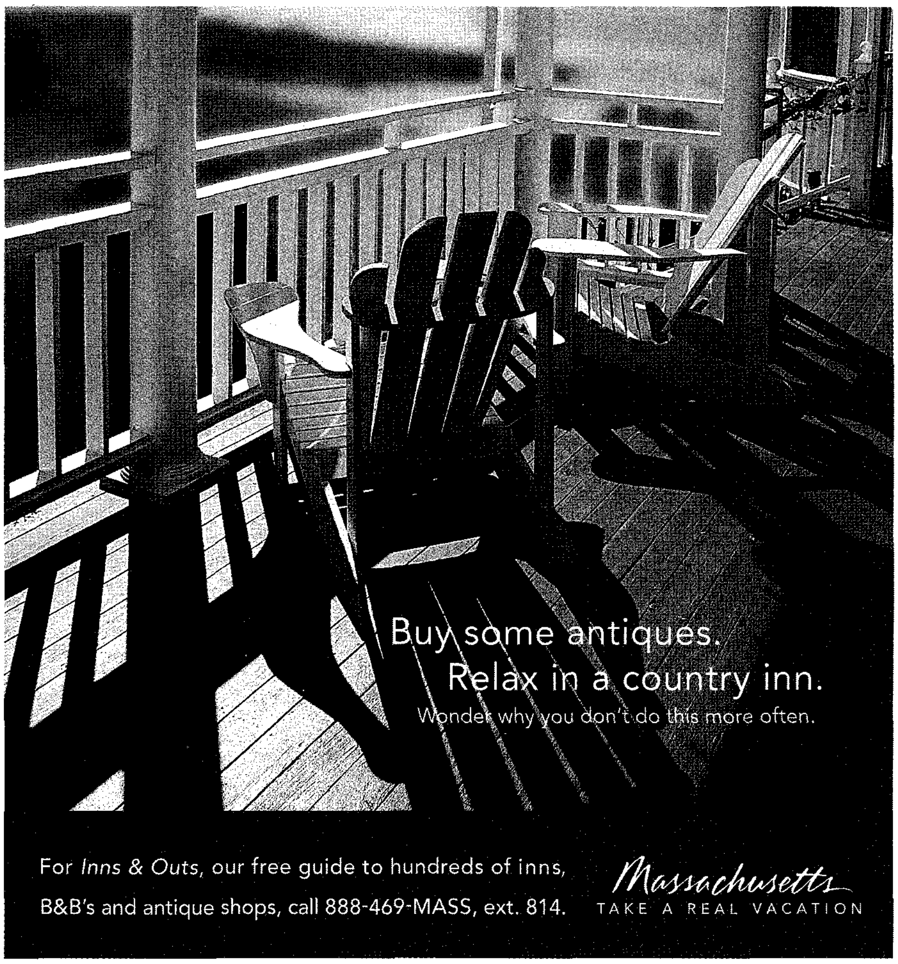
ARLENE GROCERY
95 Stanton St., between Ludlow and Orchard Sts. (358-1633)—March 9: **Superlux,** a half-British, half-Israeli outfit, stops by on Thursdays in March. The band's lead singer, Trisha Mulcahy, has an ethereal English-accented voice that travels gracefully over keyboardist Dan Yashiv's clever pop arrangements.

BOTTOM LINE
15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—March 10-11: The **Flatlanders** brought together three friends from West Texas—Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock—for a brief moment in the early seventies. The band's legend has grown over the years, and its members have established individual reputations as singers and songwriters. After reuniting briefly two years ago to contribute to the soundtrack for the film "The Horse Whisperer," the gang is back together on the road, recapturing the promise of their youth.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—March 9: The **Mekons.** More than twenty years after hitting the scene in Leeds, England, Jon Langford and company remain remarkably comfortable onstage. In town on the heels of a new album, "Journey to the End of the Night," they'll roll out their original mix of Brit pop and country cow punk like a bunch of cool high-school teachers taking over the senior talent show. March 11: **Magnetic Fields.** Led by Stephin Merritt, one of New York's most respected underground artists and a reluctant antihero whose music is as catchy as his dour bons mots are clever, the Fields will perform a slew of songs from their latest release, the wildly eclectic three-disk set "69 Love Songs."

BROWNIES
169 Avenue A, at 10th St. (420-8392)—March 9: **Papas Fritas.** This deliciously cheesy Boston trio mixes mid-sixties bubblegum pop with the over-ripe sounds of the following decade's AM radio. The band's latest shimmering offering, "Buildings and Grounds," should nudge it closer to much deserved national recognition. With the Norwegian pop of **Sister Sonny.** March 11: Japan's **Super Car** makes carefully engineered rock and roll that you'll think you've heard before. You haven't. March 13: The reinvigorating noise of **Queen Adreena,** the hard-rocking outfit led by the former Daisy Chainsaw singer Katie Jane Garside.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—March 7-8: **Gov't Mule,** a bristling Allman Brothers offshoot



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led by slide guitarist Warren Haynes. "Life Before Insanity," the band's latest release, is proof that the power trio didn't go out of fashion with Cream and Jimi Hendrix—or that, if it did go out of fashion, fashion was wrong. March 9: Ireland's **Saw Doctors** bring their Celtic punk to town. With the New York City native and eight-time All Ireland champion fiddler **Eileen Ivers.** March 10: **Kenny Wayne Shepherd,** the flaxen-haired Shreveport, Louisiana-born blues-guitar phenom, whose 1995 début album, "Ledbetter Heights," went gold before he left his teens. Shepherd began playing at age seven (he's twenty-two now), and he already has the world-weary bite of B. B. King and the fret-board pyrotechnics of his hero, the late Stevie Ray Vaughan. When he grows up, he could be dangerous. March 11: A night of ska-punk with the **Long Beach Dub Allstars.**

MAXWELL'S

1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-798-0406)—March 10: **Skanatra** sets the songs Frank made famous to ska beats. March 11: **Kristin Hersh,** a graduate of the postmodern girl group Throwing Muses, shares the stage with the riveting and unclassifiable singer-songwriter **Vic Chesnutt.** March 12: Good old-fashioned rockabilly with San Diego's **Paladins.**

RODEO BAR

375 Third Ave., at 27th St. (683-6500)—March 9: The local country outfit **Elena Skye and the Demolition String Band** rides high on Skye's fetching vocals and the virtuosity of guitarist Boo Reiners. March 12: **The Flying Neutrinos,** an itinerant New Orleans jazz band, is a family affair. Cousins Ingrid Lucia and Todd Londagin lead the group: Lucia's sassy patter and mischievous grin are a lot like Billie Holiday's, and wonder boy Londagin plays trombone, tap-dances, and has a disarming Chet Baker-like voice. They'll be swinging as they celebrate the release of their latest album, "The Hotel Child."

The Mekons throw a party at the Bowery Ballroom.

MARCELLUS HALL

S.O.B.'S

204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (243-4940)—When a question arises in Southwestern Louisiana about how to cook a particular dish, the answer always seems to start with, "Throw shrimp or crawfish on it and take it from there." Cajun fiddler Michael Doucet and his band **Beausoleil** (March 10) approach music with a similar philosophy, only instead of shellfish, they heap accordion licks and French lyrics on everything in sight. The technique is demonstrated on their latest release, the aptly named "Cajunization," which seasons its Cajun base with an eclectic mix of material, including a surf-rock song.

TONIC

107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—**Big Lazy,** the elegantly gritty instrumental trio led by the extraordinary guitarist Stephen Ulrich, stops by for a midnight show on March 11. The band, which was formerly known as Lazy Boy and recently lost a long-running battle with the La-Z-Boy corporation over its name, plays stunningly beautiful music that evokes everything from truckers' romps to the haunting film scores of Bernard Herrmann.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BIRDLAND

315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—March 10-11: A big man with lungs to match, **Kevin Mahogany** shouts blues, croons ballads, scats bebop, and does everything else a jazz singer has to do to qualify as well rounded at the start of the twenty-first century. Dining.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—The last time the ad-hoc jazz supergroup **Grand Slam** (here through March 12) performed, the remarkable Christian McBride manned the bass, joining guitarist **Jim Hall,** saxophonist **Joe Lovano,** and drummer **Lewis Nash** in a true meeting of equals. Not to worry; with bassist **George Mraz** now onboard, the level of excellence will still be unmatched. Hall is experiencing a brilliant late-career creative surge, Lovano's in full bloom, and Nash and Mraz have by now transformed rhythmic support into an art form. Dining.

CARLYLE HOTEL

Madison Ave. at 76th St. (744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound pastel murals, and, through March 17, the big, unabashed voice and even bigger emotions of **Betty Buckley.** ♦ Across the hall, in Bemelmans Bar, **Peter Mintun** is in attendance through April 29.

IRIDIUM

48 W. 63rd St. (582-2121)—Through March 12: The **Ahmad Jamal** trio. Instead of mellowing with time, Jamal gets more eccentric. A charming minimalist back in the fifties, the pianist has metamorphosed into a verbose extrovert with his own game plan of stop-and-start rhythms, mood-swing digressions, and catch-me-if-you-can shenanigans with his sidemen. Mondays belong to electric-guitar innovator Les Paul.

JAZZ STANDARD

116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—March 8-12: The **Steve Lacy** quartet, featuring **Roswell Rudd.** A lifelong love for Thelonious Monk's quirky, beautiful music has brought saxophonist Lacy and trombonist Rudd back together again. These two stalwarts of the jazz avant-garde first began playing together in the early sixties; their last recorded venture was the brilliant "Regeneration," of 1982. While Lacy has performed and recorded tirelessly since then, Rudd went underground. The new "Monk's Dream" finds both in terrific form, swaggering through tunes by Lacy, Ellington, and, of course, Monk. It's great to have the blustery Rudd back, and even better to find him nudging his exacting soprano-saxophonist partner. Dining.

JOE'S PUB

425 Lafayette St. (539-8777)—March 8-9: Pianist **Bill Charlap** is one of several gifted, thoughtful New York players who are infatuated with lyricism. He may not be the flavor du jour, but his elegance and discernment have a cleansing effect on the city. He's got the great nonsibling **Washingtons**—bassist **Peter** and drummer **Kenny**—as driving rhythm-mates.

KNITTING FACTORY

74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—March 9-12: Trombonist **Wycliffe Gordon,** a Wynton Marsalis band regular, maintains reverence for both his Southern roots and the hallowed place his instrument shares in the jazz tradition. He's grown as a stylist and composer, and he's now confidently stepping out of his mentor's shadow. March 12: Singer **Nora York's** clever conflations of iconic pop, jazz, gospel, and what-have-you are ingenious, but her affecting originals are what truly expose the quirky strength of this extravagant talent.

TONIC

107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—March 11: The **Oliver Lake Steel Quartet.** Saxophonist Lake, the avant-garde jazz icon and mainstay of the World Saxophone Quartet, has always had a taste for the tropics in his side projects. (Witness the reggae-jazz hybrid of his Jump Up! ensemble.) Lake's latest Caribbean-infused band incorporates the steel drum as a lead instrumental voice.

VILLAGE VANGUARD

178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—The **Jimmy Heath** quartet, featuring his brothers **Percy** and **Albert** and pianist **Jeb Patton,** settles in through March 12. All three brothers are virtuosos: Percy on bass, Albert on drums, and Jimmy on tenor and soprano sax and flute. They have a strong book of strikingly arranged standards, well-chosen jazz compositions, and, in Jimmy's case, memorable originals. And they swing like crazy. The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra holds sway on Mondays.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

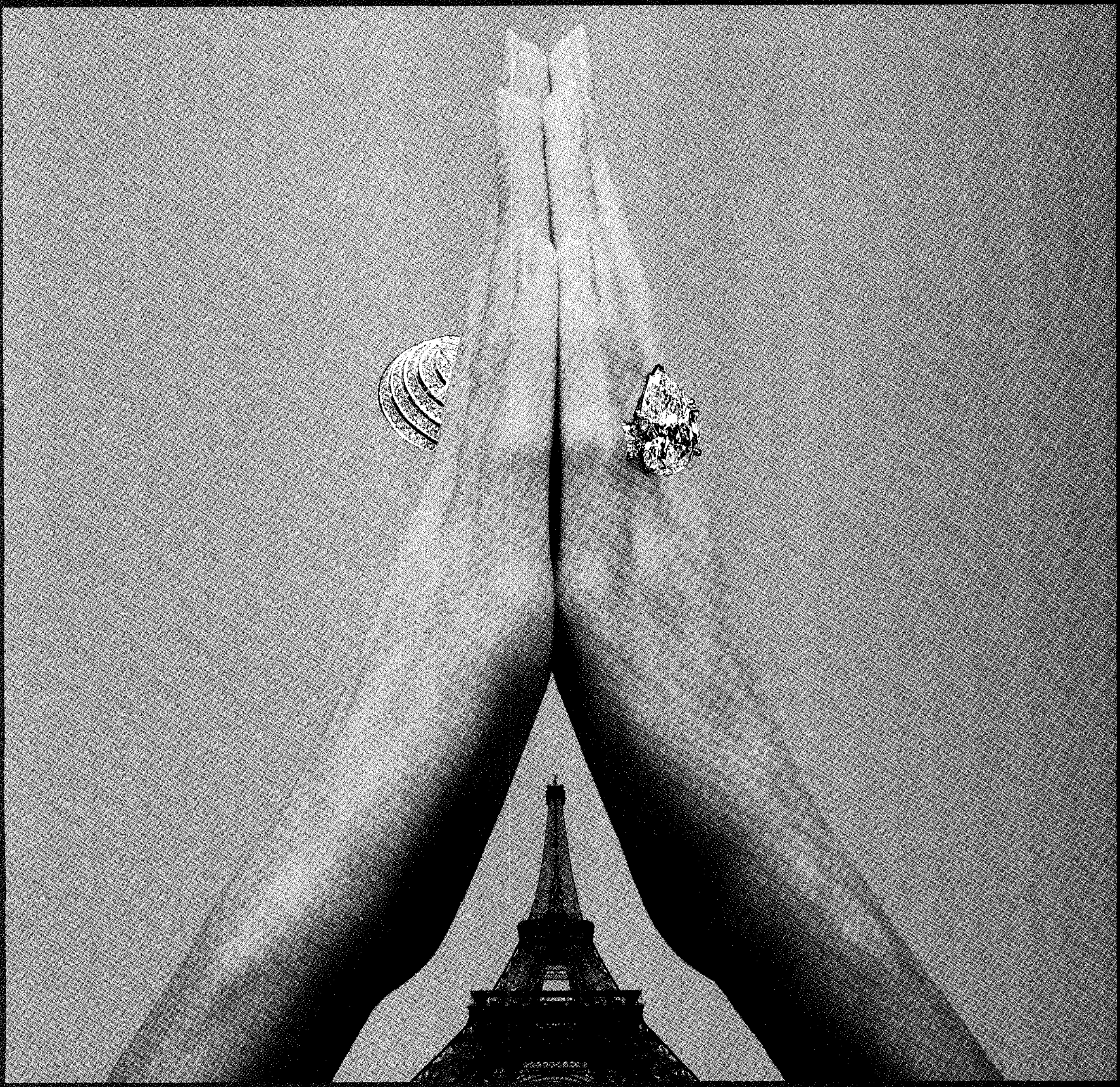
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—Signs of wear on small limewood carvings of Mary and the baby Jesus memorialize five-hundred-year-old "caresses and kisses of worshippers," according to a label in the Metropolitan Museum's **"Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages,"** a show of some sixty works in wood and stone by the German artist (and his school) who, amid the Northern Renaissance, brought Gothic style to a peak of elegance and eloquence. It helps to imagine those caresses. The sculptor's religious figures appear restrained to the verge of impassivity, though swathed in ravishing, intricate draperies that can seem stirred by divine winds. In truth, the works evoke pure raptures of medieval piety. For many, the perfect art of this unfamiliar master comes as a major discovery. Through May 14. ♦ **"Walker Evans,"** a comprehensive retrospective, the photographer's first. Through May 14. ♦ **"The World of Scholar's Rocks."** Through Aug. 20. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—**"Places"** and **"Things,"** two parts of the tripartite **"Modern Starts"** exhibition, offering works drawn from MOMA's permanent collection, all focussed on the years 1880-1920, continue through March 14. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 5:45; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:15.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—With green laser beams ricocheting through a six-story waterfall, and hundreds of TV screens providing ambient noise and light, the Nam June Paik retrospective looks, from ground level, like a sure-fire crowd-pleaser.



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CHARACTER STUDIES *The only photographer in the Cedar Bar gang of Abstract Expressionists, Aaron Siskind could even make it exciting to watch paint peel. In his nineteen-fifties work, highlighted at the Mann gallery through March 18, he shot weather-beaten lettering on dilapidated walls, precisely framed to bring emotional depth to what could have been cold graphic exercises. The Lake Michigan divers of the "Pleasures and Terrors of Levitation" series (see above) seem unusually active for him at first, but they're really just more abstractions: these gangling show-offs, exhilarated to be aloft, bend and lurch to form alphabetical shapes.*

Instead it leaves one disenchanted and puzzled. A surprisingly meagre selection of works, casually charming installations that pair TV sets with fish, candles, or plants, fill the museum's long, spiralling ramp. At the top of the rotunda, photographs of Paik's early performances have a frisson of glamour, thanks to his collaborator Charlotte Moorman's willingness to take off her clothes. For the most part, though, the father of video art comes off as an unexpectedly slight figure, a likable, playful avant-gardist whose imaginative resources have seldom matched his commitment to the idea of innovation. Through April 26. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—Selections from the permanent collection are on display. (Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM AT PHILIP MORRIS
120 Park Ave., at 42nd St. (878-2550)—**"Correspondences: Isamu Noguchi and Ellsworth Kelly."** These two apparently unrelated artists, both committed to abstraction and influenced by the organic forms of nature, prove as graceful a team as Rogers and Astaire. Each is represented by three works on paper and two major sculptures, installed to maximize affinities. Next to Noguchi's "Humpty Dumpty," a biomorphic balancing act of black slate, the two halves of Kelly's painted aluminum sculpture "Whites" look like fragments of an eggshell. Through April 7. (Open weekdays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 7:30.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (769-5100)—The Hayden Planetarium, in the new glass-sheathed Rose Center, looks like what might have arisen if Sony had commissioned I. M. Pei to build the Centre Pompidou. Space Show tickets, designed as 3-D postcard-size "passports to the universe," let you enjoy a twenty-minute cosmic journey, narrated by Tom Hanks, which goes from Earth to the Milky Way out to the Virgo Supercluster, then through a black hole right back home. You can cruise the new building, size up exhibits that boggle the mind with postulations like "On this time line, each step you take is seventy-five million years long," and watch a mini star show that begins, "Hello and welcome to the big bang. I'm Jodie Foster." Reservations for regular Space Shows are advised, and available at 769-5200. ♦ **"Body Art: Marks of Identity."** Through May 29. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

MORGAN LIBRARY
29 E. 36th St. (685-0008)—**"From Bruegel to Rubens: Netherlandish and Flemish Drawings"** is a scholarly and engrossing show, featuring nearly a quarter of the library's superb collection of Northern drawings. Michelangelo famously carped that Northern artists cared for nothing but detail, but it's easy to share their fascination when looking at these hundred or so passionately delicate, information-packed pages. Among the standouts are a panorama of frolicking ice-skaters by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and a range of marvellously meticulous mountain scenes, drawn by artists, such as Jacques de Gheyn, who had never travelled outside the lowlands. Among the later works, sketches by Rubens and his pupil Van Dyck show sleeping animals, nudes, and tangles of figures apparently dashed off at lightning speed. Here, detail has been suppressed in favor of a disciplined fluidity, at once perfectly lithe, dynamic, and boastful. Through April 30. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5; Fridays, 10:30 to 8; Saturdays, 10:30 to 6; Sundays, noon to 6.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**"Greater New York."** With more than a hundred and forty artists, this exhibition is so populous it could almost qualify as a sixth borough (candidates were selected from the existing five, as well as Westchester and New Jersey). The show was assembled collaboratively in just five months by P.S. 1 and the Museum of Modern Art, with residency and youth (just a handful of the participants are over forty) as the only apparent curatorial criteria. If any trend emerges from the welter, it's simply that anything goes. The curators sometimes force works together—Justine Kurland's provocative photographs of women in the wilderness hang opposite Brad Kalhamer's Twombly-ish painting "Happy Girls with Eggs," to the benefit of neither. It's hardly surprising, then, that the artists with rooms of their own—generally those who create videos and installations—look the best. Or sound it, in the case of Stephen Vitiello, whose electro-acoustic sound collage, sampled from accordion, bass, and violin, occupies an otherwise empty room like a little slice of heaven. Other standouts include Jeremy Blake's mesmerizing abstract digital projection and Julian LaVerdiere's show-stopping shipwreck lying in state, which had the throngs queued up solemnly to pay their respects at the mobbed opening. Through May 16. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

MAURIZIO CATTELAN / TACITA DEAN
This Italian artist is emerging as the art world's designated jester. His new work at Marian Goodman is a seven-foot-tall, painted polyester-styrene elephant wearing a white sheet with eyeholes and a trunk hole crudely cut out. The beast's painted eyes look through you with a pachydermal thousand-yard stare, eloquently abashed—henceforth you will not forget that a shy elephant makes for a really tremendous quantity of shyness. Also at Goodman are two looping films by another internationally rising star, Tacita Dean. Shot in England, they are enchanting pastorales. One of them, seven minutes long, centers on a strange old concrete military installation. The other records an hour spent in a seaside pasture during last year's solar eclipse. It features cows that react oddly to the false nightfall and, while neither shy nor bold, are absolutely adorable. Both shows through March 25. (Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 977-7160.)

LOIS DODD
A selection of spare, lovely landscapes from the seventies, nearly all views of the Maine woods. Though her subjects are tangled trunks, ferns, and branches, Dodd feels free to prune and clear them, turning wild growth into a kind of provisional architecture. Often she includes signs of human presence: a chair, a pitchfork, or most memorably, a fellow-painter, detectable only by a rectangular canvas set back among the pines. There's something wry and unsentimental about these inclusions. Dodd views the woods the way a carpenter might—as raw material for her own careful, affectionate work. Through March 11. (Fischbach, 24 W. 57th St. 759-2345.)

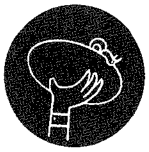
"THE ART OF 'THE SCIENCES'"
A sampling of art works that have appeared in *The Sciences*, a magazine that treats its pages as an

eclectic gallery of contemporary art. The dozen or so works on view include a radiant watercolor of primates by Alexis Rockman; a strange, Boschian fish creature painted by Wade Schuman; and a surrealist abstraction by Gerome Kamrowski—used, in the magazine's typically oblique fashion, to accompany an article on the origins of nucleated cells. Through April 21. (New York Academy of Sciences, 2 E. 63rd St. 838-0230.)

Short List

MARCO ARCE
Galeria Ramis Barquet, 41 E. 57th St. 644-9090. Through April 1.
PETER BEGLEY
Salander-O'Reilly, 20 E. 79th St. 879-6606. Through March 25.
JOSEPH DI GIORGIO
Kouros, 23 E. 73rd St. 288-5888. Through April 1.
HELEN FRANKENTHALER
Ameringer Howard, 41 E. 57th St. 935-1110. Through March 11.

TABLES FOR TWO



BANANIA
241 Smith Street, Brooklyn (718-237-9100)—Thanks to the boom along Smith Street, the small, dark restaurants that keep sprouting up there have been taking themselves just a bit too seriously and slyly inching up their prices. But this newcomer is happy to satisfy the neighborhood's need for a warm, easygoing bistro. The décor is not theme French—no vintage Dubonnet posters, just copper wainscoting, shelves full of wine bottles, and a couple of Tintin figurines. Easygoing prices bring in a sampling of the neighborhood's friendly mix of families and new-media freelancers. On a recent night, the maître d' expedited the arrival of a bowl of mashed potatoes for a restless local infant, even as the shaved-headed waiter winked salaciously at the young mother.

Appetizers are stunning. Without hesitation or regard for appetite, every party should order the cornmeal-crusted bluepoint oysters with celery-root purée, the shrimp spring roll with sweet-and-sour fennel sauce, and the Moroccan-spiced calamari. Chef Dan Houle's originality isn't in his grand interpretations but in the rambunctious sauces, vinaigrettes, and purées he adds to dishes with an air of improvisation. It's as if the ingredients were all just lucky substitutions made in a pinch. A fine filet of wild striped bass becomes a foil for its co-star of baby vegetables in sweet-and-sour onion-and-sesame sauce. The salmon (which has, of late, tended to be a little overdone) is bolstered with a nest of crispy fries and spaghetti squash, and the plump pan-roasted cod arrives with compelling black-olive mashed potatoes. The best entrée is an osso-buco-style lamb shank in a deep rosemary-infused reduction, surrounded by chicory, for contrapuntal crunch and bitterness. Steak frites turns out thoroughly satisfying, but the pork chop is hamstrung—it's got no flavor whatsoever. In many restaurants the vegetable entrées are token gestures, but Houle's wild-mushroom strudel made with filo dough and stewed leeks is a hearty late-winter dish.

The wine list is skimpy, but at the high end, the Sancerre or Syrah (which are still inexpensive) will get you through a meal just fine. The desserts, among them a sprightly enough key-lime tart and a deadly boring crème brûlée, don't keep up with Houle's pace and could use some of his exciting twists and turns. (Open daily for dinner and Fridays through Sundays for lunch or brunch as well. Entrées $12-$15.)

—*Owen Phillips*

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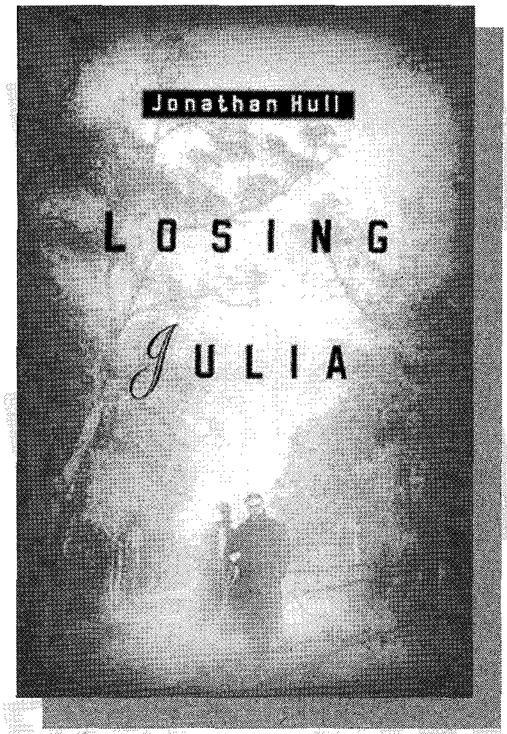

MOLLY BECK, QUAIL RIDGE BOOKS, RALEIGH, NC
"From the trenches of World War I, to a memorial 10 years later, to a veteran's final years as an 81-year-old nursing home rebel, the reader is hooked. Ultimately a story of love's endurance, this book is for the young who cannot imagine they will ever be old; the old who cannot remember they were ever young; and all those in between."

FROM LAURA CUMMINGS, WHITE BIRCH BOOKS, N. CONWAY, NH
"I absolutely fell in love with this book. Beautifully written, it's a love story, a war chronicle and a tale of growing old. Funny and touching, this book stayed with me for a long time. I'm making everyone else at the store read it and can hardly wait to share it with all of our customers."

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PERSONALITY - PASSION - KNOWLEDGE - COMMUNITY - CHARACTER

GALLERIES–CHELSEA

ALEXANDRA FEIT
Feit's "Simple Groups of Odd Order," variously sized and arranged overstuffed donuts, come in pink, white, and brown, in fur, fleece, and pleather. Their nascently sexual centers sprout fuzzy umbilical strings and cords, which dip into or protrude from the tactile holes. Amusing or shrill, depending on your mood. Through April 1. (Clementine, 526 W. 26th St. 243-5937.)

MICHELLE HANDELMAN
This mix of photographs, videos, and sculptures, billed as a "technogarden of hermaphroditic delights," bears the stamp of San Francisco, from whence the artist recently emigrated. If her "French Tickler" photographs are elegant, and her suture pieces (documenting recreational skin sewing) are cringe-inducing, her short video loop, "ICU" (translation: "I see you"), is plain funny. In it, the artist applies generous false eyelashes to the edge of the camera, murmuring sweet nothings. Through March 18. (Cristinerose, 529 W. 20th St. 206-0297.)

SINDY LUTZ
Lutz's stapled collages of body parts from glossy magazines are strung together with heavy pencil lines. Her goofy, sexualized silhouettes might be mall-going descendants of Kara Walker's plantation ladies. Play Spot-the-Model, and then guess the legal advice: could the Famous Actress threaten action over her place in "Bride with Black Lace Sleeves"? What about the further degraded model for "Chicken with Red Boots," which could as easily be called "Chicken with Red Behind"? Through March 25. (Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819.)

SALLY ROSS
If Tiepolo had been a Teletubby, the results might have resembled these elegantly wacko hybrids of still-life and landscape. Each canvas has the benign insanity of a nursery rhyme and features a potted plant—equal parts bonsai tree and Tinkertoy—set against a brooding sky. Ross's brushwork is masterfully controlled in the Italian style as bruised nimbus shifts to fluffy white in a single passage. Like bonsai themselves, these paintings are exquisitely willful mutations. Through March 11. (Audiello, 526 W. 26th St. 675-9082.)

Short List

HALUK AKAKÇE
Urbach Architecture, 526 W. 26th St.
627-0974. Through March 11.

KRISTEN OPPENHEIM
303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 255-1121.
Through March 18.

UGO RONDINONE
Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 243-2000.
Through April 15.

YOSHIRO SUDA
D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St.
352-9460. Through March 25.

GALLERIES–DOWNTOWN

ROBERT BECK
The makeshift shrine of flowers, candles and balloons outside the gallery offers teasing clues, as do the newspapers just inside the door, rolled up in plastic with the banner headline "Teenage Time Bomb" over a photo of the artist as a young man. Beck practices what could be called forensic art, creating objects and works on paper that weave investigations into true-crime tragedies (the spectres of Columbine and Matthew Shepard) together with evidence of his own personal history. Following the clues won't lead to a culprit or motive, but it will remind you that art, at its best, is an unsolved mystery. Through March 25. (CRG, 93 Grand St. 966-4360.)

BURA / SIMON FROST
A beautiful exhibition of thousand-year-old funerary vessels from the necropolis of Bura-Asinda-Sikka, in what is now Niger. These elongated clay vases were filled with the deceased's clothes and belongings and then buried, like supernatural duffel bags. Decorated with abstract faces and geometric designs, they occasionally sprout small eerie heads, as though the enclosed spirits were ascending, tuber-fashion, toward daylight. Accompanying them are a group of drawings by Frost, an English artist who spends his time obsessively repeating hundreds of tiny marks. Compared to the numinous elegance of the urns, Frost's grayish patterns seem like some kind of dreary, penitential labor. Both shows through April 1. (Blum, 99 Wooster St. 343-0441.)

TIM NOBLE & SUE WEBSTER
An elaborate, parlor trick of a show by a pair of British artist-buskers who arrange heaps of garbage that, when lit just so, cast astonishingly lifelike shadows on the gallery walls. In "Wasted Youth," the trash is from McDonald's (replete with "replica fries") and the silhouette is of the campy, Harlequin Romance variety—a lounging couple seen in profile. We're loath to admit it, but the crowd was loving every schmaltzy minute of it. Through March 25. (Deitch Projects, 76 Grand St. 343-7300.)

ATTILA RICHARD LUKACS
Once infatuated with Berlin skinheads, this Canadian-born painter has moved on to new aesthetic terrain. His latest characteristically grandiose and unruly paintings borrow from the courtly tradition of Mughal miniatures—they are full of stylized meadows, with flowers, birds, and grazing deer. In the foreground, monkeys and nude youths frolic in various states of visible arousal. There's lots to look at here, but little sense of believable subject matter. Only occasionally, as in an image of a dog bounding happily across golden-green meadows, does Lukacs's imagination match his bravado. Through April 1. (Kind, 136 Greene St. 925-1200.)

NEO RAUCH
Much as it sounds like a movement, Neo Rauch is a man's name, but if he were a movement, it would be a heavy one. Rauch, an East German state-

*Optional †Always wear your safety belt and secure children in the rear seat.

trained social realist, has put his school style to work documenting nonsensical everyday scenes. The technique, deprived of its trademark themes and subjects, is sad, intimate, and strangely moving. Stylistic and architectural references seem solidly of the fifties, though they may be of recent East German vintage. The palette is muted poster paint, and the figures are industrious, to mysterious ends. Through March 18. (Zwirner, 43 Greene St. 966-9074.)

Short List

LUCIO FONTANA
Sperone Westwater, 142 Greene St. 431-3685.
Through March 25.

JUDY FOX / KATHARINE KUHARIC
P.P.O.W, 476 Broome St. 941-8642. Both
shows through March 25.

RICO GASTON
Feldman, 31 Mercer St. 226-3232.
Through March 25.

KELLY E. LAMB
Brownstone, 39 Wooster St. 334-3455.
Through April 1.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

CHRISTIE'S
An auction of books and manuscripts includes a striking rarity—a complete, four-volume subscriber's set of the first edition of Audubon's "The Birds of America," including all four hundred and thirty-five of the artist's hand-colored, etched plates. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 636-2000. March 10.) ♦ At Christie's East: A sale of maritime art. (219 E. 67th St. 606-0430. March 8.)

SOTHEBY'S
A sale of nineteenth-century European paintings, drawings, and sculpture. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000. March 8.)

DOYLE
Neoclassic furniture and other decorative art works. (175 E. 87th St. 427-2730. March 8.)

SWANN
A wide-ranging sale of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. (104 E. 25th St. 254-4710. March 9.)

ARMORY ANTIQUES SHOW
Antiques and collectibles from the seventeenth century through the nineteenth. (7th Regiment Armory, Park Ave. at 66th St. March 8-12. For more information, call 472-1180.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

GREGORY CREWSDON
Crewsdon stages surreal color tableaux with a Hollywood-worthy production crew; his credits list lighting, set, and costume designers, along with coördinators of aerial operations and taxidermy. One picture peeks out a front window at a pregnant woman standing on the lawn in her underwear—alone amidst the alien bungalows. Through March 25. (Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St. 206-9100.)

MICHAEL FLOMEN
These large-scale gelatin silver prints become increasingly problematic the longer you look at them. At first glance Flomen seems to have got himself up to the moon with camera in tow. Or has he spent a lot of nights in the desert? Or are those lint flecks? The truth is far less unlikely or exotic. All the pictures are of Flomen's snow-filled pasture in Vermont—it turns out he's just a magician in the darkroom. No matter. For spatial tranquillity, technical elegance, and pure wonder, the results are worth being beguiled by. Through March 25. (Ricco Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819.)

MARVIN E. NEWMAN
Seven photo-essays spanning a decade (1951-60) vouch for Newman's versatility and range. Pictures taken on a snowy day in a poor Chicago neighborhood are as sensitive as Bruce Davidson's or Helen Levitt's work; a series portraying Mickey Mantle on the ball field is pure photojournalism; a collection of circus prints is moodily garish. Newman's studies at Chicago's Institute of Design, where he met Edward Steichen, are evident in his Coney Island essay: the elimination of gray tones reduces a child playing on a sandy beach to a gestural inkblot against a white background. The effect is startlingly surreal. Through March 25. (De Lellis, 47 E. 68th St. 327-1482.)

JÖRG SASSE
Modern pictures of modern architecture—color snapshots appropriated, digitized, and cropped to create landscape compositions, hung alongside a group of tightly focussed details of institutional décor, i.e., a few square feet of ceiling tile. Through March 18. (Lehmann Maupin, 39 Greene St. 965-0753.)

Short List

ELLEN BROOKS
Leslie Tonkonow, 601 W. 26th St.
255-8450. Through April 1.

LARRY FINK
Revolution, 525 W. 22nd St., 4C.
463-8037. Through March 25.

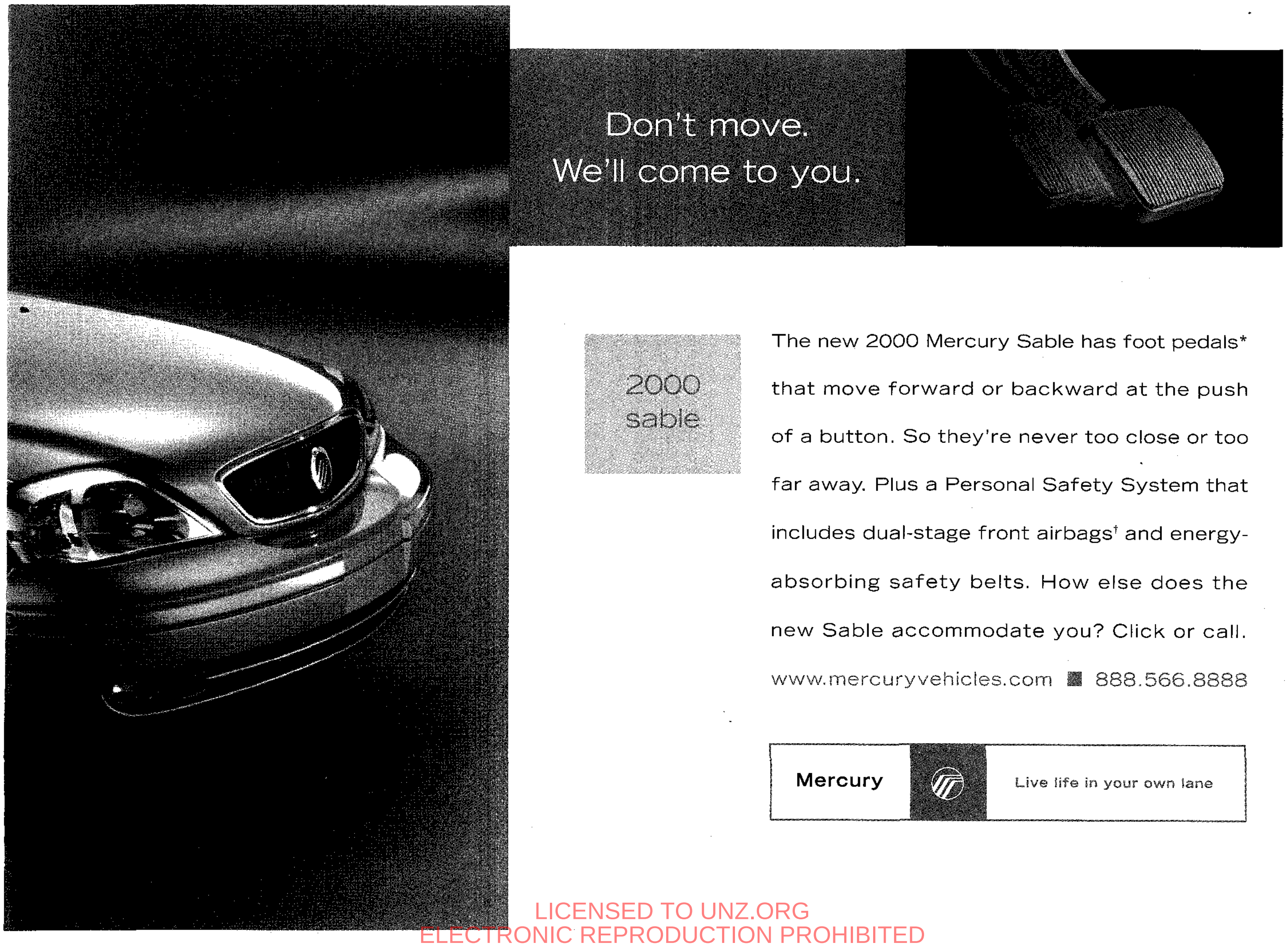
E. O. HOPPÉ
Gallery 292, at 120 Wooster St. 431-0292.
Through April 22.

TRACEY MOFFAT
Matthew Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 243-0200.
Through April 8.

JAMES RAVILIOUS / HUMPHREY SPENDER
Leica, 670 Broadway. 777-3051.
Both shows through April 8.

LOUIS ROBERT
Zabriskie, 41 E. 57th St. 752-1223.
Through April 15.

GARY SCHNEIDER / "THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF 'FORTUNE' MAGAZINE"
International Center of Photography, 1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. 860-1777. Open Tuesdays through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AARON SISKIND
Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave. 989-7600.
Through March 18.

"THE ART OF THE DAGUERREOTYPE"
Morthland, 225 Tenth Ave., at 23rd St.
Through March 18.

"IMPURE PHOTOGRAPHY"
Taranto, 245 W. 19th St. 691-9040.
Through March 18.

"PICTURING GUATEMALA"
Americas Society, Park Ave. at 68th St.
249-8950. Through April 16.

See the museum listings for a photography exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum.

CLASSICAL MUSIC OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
"La Cenerentola," with Jennifer Larmore, Raúl Giménez, Alessandro Corbelli, Simone Alaimo, and John Relyea; conducted by Bruno Campanella. (March 8 at 8 and March 11 at 1:30.) ♦ **"Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk,"** by Shostakovich, with Catherine Malfitano, Vladimir Galouzine, Mark Baker, and Sergei Koptchak; Valery Gergiev. (March 9 and March 14 at 8.) ♦ **"The Merry Widow,"** presented in English, with Frederica von Stade, Emily Pulley, Plácido Domingo, Paul Groves, and Timothy Nolen; Andrew Davis. (March 10 at 8.) ♦ **"La Traviata,"** with Patricia Racette, Stuart Neill, and Anthony Michaels-Moore; Roberto Abbado. (March 11 at 7:30.) ♦ **"Il Barbiere di Siviglia,"** with Sonia Ganassi, Michael Schade, Thomas Hampson, John Del Carlo, and Egils Silens; Mr. Campanella. (March 13 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000.)

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
March 8-9 at 7:30 and March 11 at 1:30 and 8: "Porgy and Bess." ♦ March 10 at 8 and March 12 at 1:30: "Tosca." (New York State Theatre. 870-5570.)

NEW YORK GRAND OPERA
Presenting "La Traviata," fully staged, with Vincent La Selva conducting. (Flushing Town Hall, 137-35 Northern Blvd., Queens. 718-463-7700. March 12 at 2.)

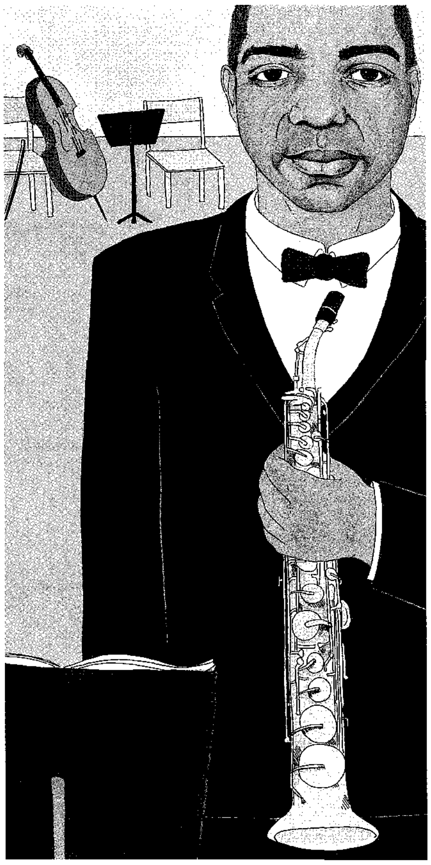
ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

The box-office number for Alice Tully Hall is 875-5050; for Avery Fisher Hall, 875-5030; and for Carnegie Hall and Weill Recital Hall, 247-7800.

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Kurt Weill's "Street Scene," refashioned from Elmer Rice's play about violence in a New York tenement, ran for a hundred and fifty-six performances at Broadway's Adelphi Theatre after it was unveiled, on January 9, 1947. The composer hoped to extract a concert sequence from the opera, but he died before he could realize that project. The Kurt Weill Foundation has now underwritten the creation of precisely such a condensation, by musicologist Kim Kowalke and longtime Weill interpreter Lys Symonette. Leonard Slatkin conducts the première of this new version (which has been pluralized to "Street Scenes" to distinguish it from the original), with a cast that comprises sopranos Christine Goerke and Yvonne Gonzales, tenor Charles Castronovo, baritone Michael Chioldi, and bass-baritone Dean Ely. The first half of the program is given over to Bernstein's "A Quiet Place" Suite and James Pugh's Trombone Concerto (with Joseph Alessi, the orchestra's principal trombonist, as soloist). (Avery Fisher Hall. March 9-11 at 8.) ♦ Note: As part of its Weill centenary celebrations, the orchestra is also presenting the actress and singer Andrea Marcovicci, along with pianist Shelly Markham, in a cabaret program of pieces by Weill. (Kaplan Penthouse, Rose Building, Lincoln Center. March 9-10 at 8 and March 11 at 8 and 10:30. For information about tickets, call 875-5030.)

PITTSBURGH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Mariss Jansons conducts Weber's "Oberon" Overture, Mendelssohn's E-Minor Violin Concerto (featuring Sarah Chang), and Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps." (Carnegie Hall. March 8 at 2.)

ORPHEUS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
Saxophonist Branford Marsalis makes a rare appearance on the classical-music stage, appearing as the soloist in Milhaud's "Scaramouche," Ibert's "Concertino da Camera," and arrangements of pieces by Satie, Ravel, and Fauré. Stravinsky's Suite No. 2 for Small Orchestra and Milhaud's "Le Boeuf sur le Toit" and "La Création du Monde" complete the program for this conductorless ensemble. (Carnegie Hall. March 8 at 8.)



Saxophonist Branford Marsalis, appearing as soloist with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, at Carnegie Hall.

LARA TOMLIN

AMERICAN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Friedrich Nietzsche is known to all as a philosopher, of course, and music aficionados are generally aware of his ardent championing of Wagner's aesthetics and his ensuing reversal, in which he became one of Wagner's most vocal opponents. Debatable as Nietzsche's writings about music are, they were at least born of an informed opinion: he was an accomplished pianist, and in his youth he had a sideline going as an amateur composer. In this concert, Leon Botstein leads Nietzsche's last major composition, his "Hymnus an der Leben," for chorus and orchestra (composed in 1887), in addition to works inspired by his writings: Delius's "Mittersnachtlied" and Strauss's symphonic poem "Also Sprach Zarathustra" (both of which are musical responses to Nietzsche's extended prose poem of that name), and Wolfgang Rihm's "Abendgesangszenen" No. 4 and No. 5 (from 1979 and 1981, here featuring soprano Emily Golden and baritone Jeffrey Kneebone), which employ Nietzsche texts. (Avery Fisher Hall. March 8 at 8.)

ST. FRANCIS SINGERS
Performing Claudio Merulo's "Missae in Dominicus Diebus," along with works by Giovanni Gabrieli and Luzzasco Luzzaschi. (St. Francis of Assisi Church, 135 W. 31st St. March 9 at 1:15. No tickets necessary.)

CIVIC ORCHESTRA OF CHICAGO
Daniel Barenboim conducts this ensemble, which principally comprises students preparing for professional careers in music, plus three young pianists who are participating in a Carnegie Hall workshop on concerto preparation, in Beethoven's "Leonore" Overture No. 3, Mozart's Concerto for Two Pianos (featuring Saleem Abboud-Ashkar and Shai Wosner), Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 (with Claire-Marie Le Guay), Carter's "Allegro Scorrevole," and Ravel's "Daphnis et Chloé" Suite No. 2. (Carnegie Hall. March 9 at 7:30.)

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
At Carnegie Hall, Pierre Boulez conducts four programs, each of which includes the American première of a work commissioned by Carnegie Hall and the London Symphony in consortium with several European presenters. March 10 at 8: Peter Eötvös's new work "zeroPoints," along with Ligeti's Violin Concerto (with Christian Tetzlaff) and Bartók's "The Wooden Prince." ♦ March 11 at 8: Berio's "Notturno," Salvatore Sciarrino's new composition "Recitativo Oscuro" (featuring pianist Maurizio Pollini), and Schoenberg's massive symphonic poem "Pelleas und Melisande." ♦ March 12 at 2: Berg's "Three Pieces for Orchestra," Olga Neuwirth's recently composed "Clinamen/Nodus," and Mahler's Symphony No. 6. ♦ March 13 at 8: Boulez's own "Originel" from ". . . explosante-fixe . . ." (featuring flutist Paul Edmund-Davies), George Benjamin's recently completed "Palimpsest," Schoenberg's Piano Concerto (with Daniel Barenboim as soloist), and Stravinsky's "Petrushka" (in the 1911 version).

NEW YORK COLLEGIUM
Reinhard Goebel leads the period-instrument players and violinist Jörg-Michael Schwarz in works by Schmelzer, Biber, Telemann, and Vivaldi. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. 840-2824. March 11 at 8.)

I CANTORI DI NEW YORK
Mark Shapiro directs the chamber chorus in five vocal quartets by Brahms, in addition to Messiaen's "O Sacrum Convivium" and Jean Langlais's "Messe Solennelle." (St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. March 11 at 8. For information about tickets, call 439-4758.)

NEW YORK VIRTUOSO SINGERS
Harold Rosenbaum directs twentieth-century choral works by German, Austrian, and Swiss composers, including Schoenberg's "De Profundis," Hindemith's "Five Songs on Ancient Texts," and an excerpt from Frank Martin's "Songs of Ariel." (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3330. March 11 at 8.)

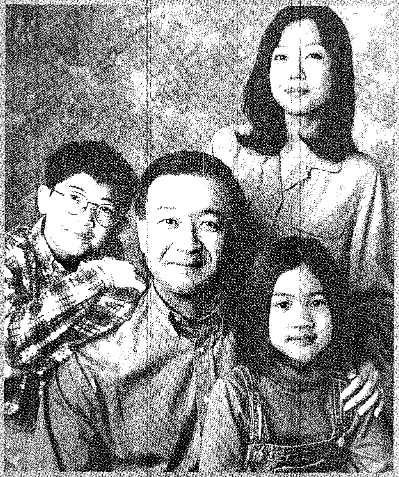
VIENNA RADIO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Dennis Russell Davies leads Schubert's Symphony No. 3, Giya Kancheli's "A la Duduki," and Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 (featuring Peter Serkin). (Avery Fisher Hall. March 12 at 3.)

JUPITER SYMPHONY
Jens Nygaard conducts Mendelssohn's rarely played Violin Concerto in D Minor (featuring Vadim Gluzman) and doubles as the piano soloist in Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," in a concert that also includes arrangements of dances by John Dowland and Albert Ketélby's once ubiquitous "In a Persian Market." (Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, 152 W. 66th St. March 13 at 2 and 7 and March 14 at 8. For information about tickets, call 799-1259.)

NEW YORK CHAMBER SYMPHONY
Gerard Schwarz conducts works by six American composers: C. Alan Beeler, Elizabeth Bell, Jerome Goodman, Igor Korneitchouk, William Thomas McKinley, and Walter Ross. (Alice Tully Hall. March 13 at 8.)

PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
Charles Dutoit conducts Shostakovich's "Festive Overture," Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 (fea-

How do you measure success?



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For three days, *The New Yorker* will take over New York. There will be over twenty readings by *New Yorker* fiction writers in venues all over town. There will be panel discussions, as well as conversations between our best journalists and the people they've written about. There will be an exhibition of cartoons (in the subway, of course), an architectural tour of the city, a Saturday-night humor gala, and an all-star open-air poetry reading.

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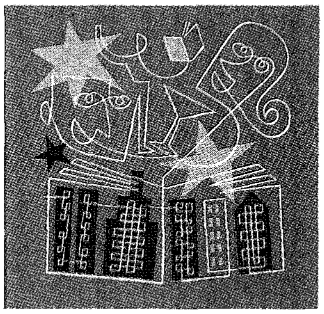

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turing Martha Argerich, renowned for her dynamic mastery of this work's challenges of technique and stamina), and Copland's Symphony No. 3. (Carnegie Hall. March 14 at 8.)

RECITALS

WHITMAN STRING QUARTET
The artists formerly known as the Magellan String Quartet perform quartets by composers who limited their contributions to the genre to single opuses: Verdi, Corigliano, and Ravel. (Alice Tully Hall. March 8 at 8.)

CHITOSE OKASHIRO
Pianist, in a program of music of a spiritual or introspective bent, including four of Messiaen's "Preludes" and selections from his "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus," Takemitsu's "Rain Tree Sketches," and two pieces by her brother, Ichizo Okashiro. (Miller Theatre, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 854-7799. March 8 at 8.)

AHN TRIO
The three sisters of this piano trio are joined by several colleagues to play music by John Zorn and Paul Schoenfeld. (Miller Theatre, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 854-7799. March 9 at 8.)

AKI TAKAHASHI
The pianist offers the première of Somei Satoh's "Frozen Lights," as well as music by Cage, Xenakis, and other contemporary composers. (Japan Society, 333 E. 47th St. 832-1155. March 9 at 8.)

BARGEMUSIC
Violinist Mark Peskanov, cellist Martti Rousi, and pianist Naoko Ichihashi present a pair of programs. March 9 at 8 and March 11 at 7:30: Sonatas by Debussy (for cello) and Prokofiev (for violin, in F Minor), in addition to Brahms's C-Major Piano Trio. ♦ March 10 at 7:30 and March 12 at 4: Sibelius's F-Major Piano Sonata and his "Malinconia" (for cello and piano), in addition to piano trios by Haydn (in C Major, Hob. XV: 21) and Shostakovich (in E Minor). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-4061.)

ANNER BYLSMA
The cellist, an eminence of the historical-performance movement, performs Bach's six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello. March 10 at 6:30: The Suites No. 1, No. 3, and No. 5. ♦ March 11 at 3: The Suites No. 2, No. 4, and No. 6. (Morgan Library, 29 E. 36th St. 685-0008, ext. 347.)

BELCEA STRING QUARTET
In its American début recital, this London-based foursome (comprising Romanian and British violinists, a Polish violist, and a Scottish cellist) performs quartets by Haydn (in D Major, Op. 76, No. 5), Britten (his Third), and Ravel. (Weill Recital Hall. March 10 at 8.)

BEAUX ARTS TRIO
The ensemble offers Beethoven's piano trios in G Major (Op. 1, No. 2), B-Flat Major (WoO 39), and E-Flat Major (Op. 70, No. 2), in addition to his Variations in E-Flat Major (Op. 44). (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 570-3949. March 10-11 at 8.)

CHAMBER POTPOURRI
Soprano Lauren Flanigan, composer and humorist Peter Schickele, and tenor David Dusing are among the performers who will participate in a program sponsored by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which includes Thea Musgrave's "Voices from the Ancient World," Deborah Drattell's "Elshes Chayil," and Lili Boulanger's "D'un Matin de Printemps." (Alice Tully Hall. March 11 at 8.)

GUARNERI QUARTET
March 11 at 8: Performing string quartets by Dvořák (in E-Flat Major, Op. 51), Beethoven (in F Minor), and Sibelius. (Washington Irving High School, Irving Pl. at 16th St. For information about tickets, call 586-4680.) ♦ March 12 at 2: Quartets by Brahms (in C Minor), Bartók (his Second), and Ravel. (LeFrak Concert Hall, Queens College. 718-793-8080.)

MACHAUT FESTIVAL
Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300-77) is remembered as the preëminent composer and poet of the French Ars Nova, but his legacy has largely retreated to the domain of scholars. The Cloisters makes a brave stab at rectifying the situation through a tripartite festival that explores the range of style and forms to be found in his large output of sacred and secular music, as well as his poetry. March 12 at 1: A lecture, with tea, by Imanuel Willheim, formerly of the Hartt School. ♦ March 12 at 1 and 3: Ensemble Anonymous, a Quebec-based medieval ensemble, performs several of Machaut's motets, in addition to his landmark, four-voiced "Messe de Nostre Dame," one of the earliest polyphonic settings of the complete Ordinary of the Mass and probably the first by a single composer. (Cloisters, Fort Tryon Park. 650-2280. Additional programs are scheduled for March 26 and April 16.)

TRIO PARNASSUS
This German piano trio performs Schubert's "Notturno," Eduard Steuermann's trio transcription of Schoenberg's "Verklärte Nacht," and Smetana's Trio in G Minor. (Frick Collection, 1 E. 70th St. 288-0700. March 12 at 5.)

VIRGINIUS BARKAUSKAS
Organist, playing the 1969 Concerto for Organ by his Lithuanian compatriot Julius Juzeliunas, Widor's Symphony No. 6, and works by Bach, Vierne, and Jean Gillou. (Alice Tully Hall. March 12 at 6.)

CYGNUS ENSEMBLE
The modern-music group presents "Come Chitarra," by the late oboist and composer Ronald Roseman, George Crumb's "Mundus Canis," and Charles Wuorinen's "Epithalamium," among other chamber works. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 501-3300. March 12 at 8.)

ROBERT LLOYD
In his New York début recital, the long-established British bass offers songs by Schubert, Brahms, Vaughan Williams, and others, with pianist John Constable assisting. (Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center. March 13 at 7:30. For information about tickets, call 875-5050.)

VIVECA GENAUX
In her New York début recital, the Alaskan soprano is joined by members of Chatham Baroque (a period-instrument chamber ensemble) to perform works by Handel, Domenico Scarlatti, Giovanni Battista Bononcini, and the Latin-American Baroque composers Pablo Esteve and Antonio Literes. (Weill Recital Hall. March 13 at 8.)

MONOMOY MUSIC
Presenting Mozart's C-Major Flute Quartet, Liszt's "Malédiction," for piano and strings, and two late works by Dohnányi: his Serenade for String Trio and his Passacaglia and Aria, both for flute. (Weill Recital Hall. March 14 at 8.)

KALICHSTEIN-LAREDO-ROBINSON TRIO
Performing piano trios by Schubert (his "Notturno"), Dvořák (in E Minor, the "Dumky"), and (with violinist Ida Kavafian and violist Steven Tenenbom assisting) Elgar's Piano Quintet. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100. March 14-15 at 8.)

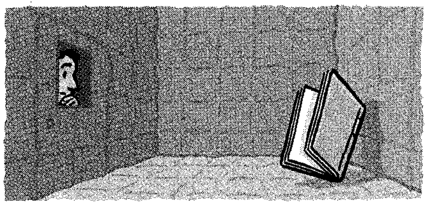
ABOVE AND BEYOND

READINGS
March 9 at 7: By actors Peter McRobbie and Jefferson Mays, from stories by Adam Haslett and Philip Gourevitch which have appeared in *Zoetrope* magazine. (West Bank Café, 407 W. 42nd St. For reservations, which are required, call 800-372-1131, ext. 5656.) ♦ March 13 at 7:30: By poets Chris Edgar and John Yau. (K.G.B., 85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary.)

TALKS
March 9 at 8: Neil de Grasse Tyson, director of the American Museum of Natural History's newly rebuilt Hayden Planetarium, talks about the technology involved in making the heavens accessible. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 996-1100.) ♦ March 10 at 6: Barry Lopez, who won a National Book Award for "Arctic Dreams," his 1986 account of travelling in northern Canada, discusses the influence of landscape on his writing. (Celeste Bartos Forum, New York Public Library, Fifth Ave. at 42nd St. 930-0571.)

BOOK CURRENTS

It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World



CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

In the film "Girl, Interrupted," Winona Ryder, as the psychologically challenged heroine, says, "Crazy is you or me, amplified." The Susannah Kaysen memoir (Vintage), on which the film is based, offers a more specific definition of the author's own amplification: "Too much perception, and beyond the plethora of perceptions, a plethora of thoughts about the perceptions." Several new books examine what happens when the human mind works in ways that are mysterious even to its owner.

Mental hyperactivity, tinged with paranoia, was the bane of Daniel Paul Schreber, a German jurist institutionalized at the turn of the last century. In **MEMOIRS OF MY NERVOUS ILLNESS** (New York Review of Books), Schreber coined the phrase "compulsive thinking" to describe how thoughts were planted in his head by "rays," supernatural beings formed from the souls of long-dead people. He was thus denied "man's natural right of temporary rest from mental activity through thinking nothing."

OUTSIDER ART (Thames & Hudson), by Colin Rhodes, tracks the growing interest by collectors in art by the insane, beginning with the collection of psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn in nineteen-twenties Germany. Rebecca Shannonhouse's anthology, **OUT OF HER MIND: WOMEN WRITING ON MADNESS** (Modern Library), features famous first-person accounts of mental breakdowns, whose authors range from Margery Kempe to Sylvia Plath. "Ten Days in a Madhouse" tells the story of an investigative stunt in which the journalist Elizabeth Cochrane (Nellie Bly) faked insanity in order to enter an asylum. Once there, her madness was presumed no matter how sanely she behaved. "I began to have a smaller regard for the ability of doctors than I had ever had before," she said after an interview in which she was declared "positively demented." —*Leo Carey*

Books.

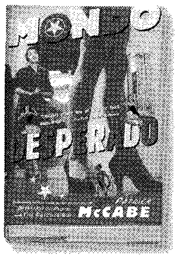
[AT BARNES & NOBLE]

The World Lives between These Covers

MONDO DESPERADO

by Patrick McCabe

From the acclaimed author of *The Butcher Boy* comes a novel overflowing with mordant wit. Barntrosna is a small town like no other, where it seems everyone lives two lives: one in public and another behind closed doors. Alternately surreal and commonplace characters and a plot propelled by McCabe's distinctive, narrative voice make this his most inspired work yet. (HarperCollins)



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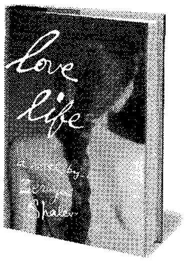
LOVE LIFE

by Zeruya Shalev

Hailed by the *New York Times* as a book that "broke all the barriers," bestselling Israeli author Zeruya Shalev's *Love Life* is rife with sensuality, psychology, the sacred, and the profane. Yaara quits her marriage after falling hard for an older, self-assured man and soon learns the true nature of passion—in all its beauty and ruin.
(Grove Press)



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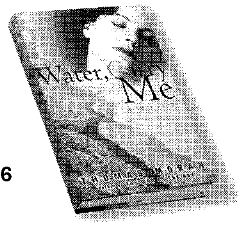
WATER, CARRY ME

by Thomas Moran

Young love and political turmoil collide on the rocky shores of southern Ireland in a new novel from the acclaimed author of *The World I Made for Her*. Eloquent and inspiring, the story centers on a woman crossing the divide between innocence and experience within a country marred by violence. (Riverhead Books)



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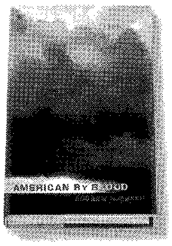
AMERICAN BY BLOOD

by Andrew Huebner

Inspired by the life of his great-great-grandfather (whose infantry column arrived at Little Bighorn a *day late), Andrew Huebner spins a tale of three* army scouts who light upon the destruction that was Custer's last stand. They soon find their lives consumed by a thirst for revenge in a book that melds American history with personal evolution. (Simon & Schuster)



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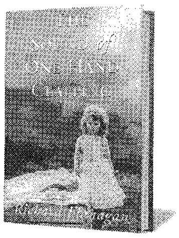
DISCOVER
GREAT NEW WRITERS AT BARNES & NOBLE

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING

by Richard Flanagan

Australia's Richard Flanagan enchants with a story of grief and redemption. Thirty-five years after being abandoned by her mother and left to an alcoholic father haunted by the tragedies of WWII, Sonja Buloh returns to her childhood home in Tasmania, determined to lay the ghosts of her past to rest and fill the void in her heart. (Atlantic Monthly Press)



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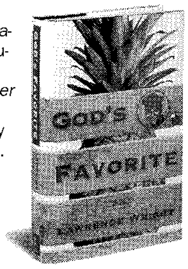
GOD'S FAVORITE

by Lawrence Wright

Manuel Antonio Noriega is the star of an international adventure fueled by dark humor and populated by characters like Oliver North, George Bush and Fidel Castro. Award-winning *New Yorker* writer Lawrence Wright revisits the tumult that was Panama under Noriega and finds poignancy and pathos in the story of a dictator on the run. (Simon & Schuster)



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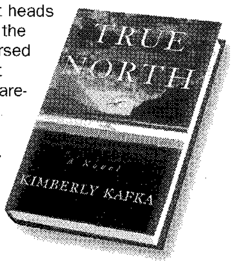
TRUE NORTH

by Kimberly Kafka

A young woman trying to escape her past heads to the Alaskan wilds to start over among the Ingalik Indians. But a tourist couple unversed in local customs forces her into a conflict sure to unravel the new life she has so carefully built. Lyrical and powerful, Kimberly Kafka's writing conveys the struggles of wilderness survival and the human heart. (Dutton)



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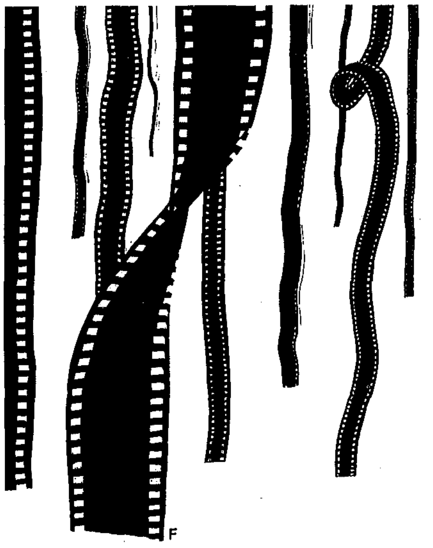

MOVIES OPENING

CONDO PAINTING
A documentary by John McNaughton about the artist George Condo, including interviews with Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. Opening March 10.

DETERRENCE
The President (Kevin Pollak) must decide whether or not to nuke Iraq, in this geopolitical thriller written and directed by Rod Lurie. Opening March 10. (Union Square.)

MIDNIGHT
It's New Year's Eve, 1999, in Brazil, and a prisoner is set free, on the condition that he kill an old friend. Directed by Daniela Thomas and Walter Salles. In Portuguese. Opening March 10. (The Screening Room.)

MISSION TO MARS
A space epic directed by Brian De Palma, about a rescue mission to the Red Planet. With Tim Robbins and Kim Delaney. Opening March 10.

THE NINTH GATE
Johnny Depp plays a rare-book dealer hired by a wealthy collector to locate a text with the power to conjure up Satan. Written and directed by Roman Polanski. Opening March 10.

ORPHANS
A dark comedy set in Glasgow, about four siblings who reunite on the eve of their mother's funeral. Directed by Peter Mullan. Opening March 10.

FILM NOTES

If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.

THE BEACH
A cautionary tale for travellers, in which Richard (Leonardo DiCaprio) arrives in Thailand, learns of a mythical beach, and makes the elementary mistake of trying to find it. He and his companions swim to Paradise, and soon human malevolence is running high, thanks to the tensions among the happy campers who live by the water. There is the scary Sal (Tilda Swinton) and the charming Françoise (Virginie Ledoyen), both of whom already have boyfriends, and both of whom hit on Richard. (Someone should have explained to them that a crush on DiCaprio is not exactly an unprecedented emotion.) The film skitters along nicely for the first half; from then on, it grows dark and deadly, as Richard—and sometimes the images on screen—start to go mad. (When the whole thing briefly turns into a video game, are we meant to ponder the crowded horrors of Western consciousness, or merely to be annoyed?) The director is Danny Boyle, the screenwriter is John Hodge, and the producer is Andrew Macdonald; together they made "Shallow Grave" and "Trainspotting," and you wonder whether they were wise to quit the Scottish turf they know so well. This movie, which was adapted from the bestselling Alex Garland novel, wants so badly to be a cult film that it forgets to be any good.—*Anthony Lane* (2/14/00) (Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, East 86th Street Cinemas, 62nd & Broadway, and Union Square.)

BOILER ROOM
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Chelsea West, Cinema 1, 84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, and Village East Cinemas.)

BOYS DON'T CRY
A delicately conceived but fearless movie. In small-town Nebraska, a young woman named Teena Brandon (Hilary Swank) clips her hair into a butch cut, flattens her breasts, puts on boys' clothes and a boy's swagger, and passes in the world as Brandon Teena, handsome young dude. What she feels is pure exhilaration, the excitement of leaving her past behind and becoming a lover; what we feel is dismay and fear. Brandon falls in with a group of derelict, white-trash kids and attracts the languid beauty Lana (Chloë Sevigny), who allows herself to think that Brandon is a man—with inevitably disastrous results. The movie is a fine, terrifying tragic poem that is also, at times, subversively funny: the women who like Brandon seem to want the feminine as well as the masculine in a lover. Director Kimberly Peirce, who wrote the screenplay with Andy Bienen, embraces a full-bodied lyrical realism in which nothing is exaggerated but nothing is avoided either.—*David Denby* (12/20/99) (East 86th Street Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, Quad Cinema, and 64th and 2nd.)

THE CIDER HOUSE RULES
The director Lasse Hallström has come to specialize in grownup movies about kids and teen-agers, especially of the luckless variety. This new picture, adapted by John Irving from his own novel, teems with scores of the little beggars; the tale begins at a snowbound orphanage in Maine, where Dr. Larch (Michael Caine) tends to the bodies and souls of the unwanted, even extending his skills to an illegal abortion practice. His protégé is Homer Wells (Tobey Maguire), who is set to follow in Larch's footsteps until those of Candy (Charlize Theron) appear. Homer departs for the wide world, where he learns about apples and sex, in that order. As an older and wiser man he returns to his destiny, although the getting of that wisdom has been oddly unengaging. The orphan scenes have an imaginative solidity that fades as the film proceeds, and you can't work out whether the gruelling social issues, like incest and abortion, are the subject of the movie or simply ballast. As apple movies go, this one lacks a core.—*A.L.* (12/13/99) (Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, Criterion Center, East 86th Street Cinemas, Gotham Cinema, Kips Bay Theatre, and Lincoln Square.)

THE CUP
Khyentse Norbu, a Tibetan incarnate lama, directed this spare, simply produced picture that tells the story of a group of young monks who ask their abbot for permission to rent a television set so they can watch the final match of the 1998 World Cup. Norbu shot the film at Chokling monastery in India, and all of the "characters" are actual monks, who mostly play themselves. The Tibet typically shown to us by Hollywood is so freighted with consequence that it's refreshing to see a monastery depicted as a kind of New Age prep school, complete with a jocular give-and-take among the masters and pupils and surreptitious peeks at girlie magazines. A thirteen-year-old novice, Jamyang Lordo, shines as a cheeky troublemaker who worships the Brazilian superstar Ronaldo. ("He has a shaved head, but he is not a monk.") All is not lightness, though. The Chinese occupation of Tibet is frequently hinted at, and the young monks' love of soccer, while mirthful and humanizing, shows the difficulty of preserving Tibetan culture in exile. Norbu does much here with very little; his film is a testament to the power of understatement. In Tibetan and Hindi.—*Michael Agger* (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Village East Cinemas.)

GHOST DOG: THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI
Part satire, part comic book, Jim Jarmusch's new film is set in a future that's one beat beyond the present and takes place in a generic cityscape called the Industrialized State. Forest Whitaker stars as a hulking, dangerous, yet curiously gentle samurai known as Ghost Dog. He follows the austere precepts of the samurai code but is also partial to gangsta rap and high-tech weaponry. His master is an Italian mob underling who serves a family in hilarious decline: they operate out of the back of a Chinese restaurant and cannot make the rent on their social club. Jarmusch keeps the camera moving slowly, attending to details, and the rap soundtrack by RZA (of Wu-Tang Clan fame) gives the whole undertaking a fuguelike quality. When the movie becomes a showdown between two ancient codes—the samurai and *omertà*—Jarmusch playfully aligns the pretend violence of cartoons with the stylized violence of Hollywood, leading to an enigmatic ending that is thoroughly unnerving. It's like an elaborate joke without a punch line. The setup, though, is worth it, thanks to Whitaker's quiet, powerful performance; in Jarmusch's hands he becomes a beacon of purity in a collapsing world.—*M.A.* (Angelika Film Center, 84th Street Sixplex, and 42nd Street E Walk.)

THE INSIDER
Midnight calls, clandestine meetings, threatening E-mail messages, not to mention cell phones used as obsessively as lances and shields in a jousting epic: the circuits never stop burning in this self-important but juicily entertaining public-affairs melodrama about big-time journalism and corporate villainy. Russell Crowe plays the real-life whistle-blower Jeffrey Wigand, who in 1995 had devastating things to reveal about his former employer, tobacco giant Brown & Williamson, and Al Pacino is the bristling "60 Minutes" producer Lowell Bergman, who wanted to bring Wigand's information to the public. The two men—one stolid, the other self-dramatizing—make an odd but satisfying couple; they are meant to represent two kinds of personal honor arrayed against venal or merely smooth corporate game-players, including Michael Gambon as a tobacco executive and Christopher Plummer as a mildly satirized Mike Wallace. Director Michael Mann creates a rising line of tension and paranoia which leads, paradoxically, to a muted, not entirely reassuring ending. Mann and Eric Roth wrote the screenplay, which is based on actual events and on Marie Brenner's reporting in *Vanity Fair*. With Bruce McGill and Diane Venora.—*D.D.* (11/8/99) (First & 62nd Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.)

JUDY BERLIN
Suburbia's dysfunction has become such a predictable cliché that adding a solar eclipse to a movie set in Long Island seems a bit like pouring gasoline onto a fire. Despite this astral contrivance, Eric Mendelsohn's movie gives us one of the more resonant depictions of the crabgrass frontier. Edie Falco plays the title character, whose sincere, uncluttered wish to leave town and become an actress in Los Angeles mesmerizes David Gold, who is stagnating at home after a failed attempt at filmmaking. Mirroring their relationship is the one between David's father, a school principal shackled by routine, and Judy's mother, an icy, inhibited teacher. Many of the performances are good; the best is by Madeline Kahn as Mrs. Gold, a housewife who guesses (correctly) that her husband no longer loves her. In the surreal half-light of the eclipse, she wanders through the neighborhood on a self-charted "space walk," letting the conversation in her head spill out onto the empty lawns. Her encounters along the way clue us into her shared isolation: suburbia is a place where everyone spins in their sealed-up emotional orbits.—*M.A.* (State.)

THE KILLER
Both sides of the John Woo debate (is he a visionary synthesist or an idiot savant?) get ammunition from this key 1989 work. Danny Lee plays a cop

who can see the heroic dimensions of a murderer—the redoubtable Chow Yun-fat, a professional assassin who accidentally blinds a nightclub singer and then devotes himself to her care. As Chow Yun-fat tangles with both the police and his employers (they want him offed for blowing his cover), gargantuan gunplay meets Victorian sentimentality and idealism, often in the same scene. The furious shooting is halted for declarations of friendship or statements of principle. Woo afficionados swallow this whole-hog; the rest of us applaud the virtuoso staging, snicker at the histrionics, and generally find ourselves unwilling to suspend disbelief. In Cantonese.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; March 8.)

KLUTE
Jane Fonda in possibly her finest dramatic performance, as Bree, an intelligent, high-bracket call girl, in Alan J. Pakula's 1971 murder-melodrama. The picture is reminiscent of the good detective mysteries of the forties—it has the lurking figures, the withheld information, the standard gimmick of getting the heroine to go off alone so she can be menaced (in this case, it's by a big-shot sadistic sex fiend), and so on. The life surrounding Bree's profession frightens her, but the work itself has peculiar compensations—she enjoys her power over her customers. She's maternal and provocative with them, confident and contemptuously cool. She's a different girl alone—huddled in bed in her disorderly room. The suspense plot involves the ways in which prostitutes attract the forces that destroy them. Bree's knowledge that as a prostitute she has nowhere to go but down and her mixed-up efforts to escape make her one of the strongest women characters to reach the screen.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; March 14.)

THE LITTLE THIEF/ALONE
Two short films by the director of "The Dream Life of Angels," Erick Zonca. "The Little Thief," which lasts little more than an hour, was made for French television, although it swiftly dispels any notion that it provides family entertainment. (No American network would broadcast anything so brutal, or so brilliant.) Nicolas Duvauchelle plays Esse, a baker's assistant who drifts from Orléans to Marseilles and falls in with a bad crowd. He learns to box, and to care for himself, yet he barely escapes with his life. "Alone" is half as long and twice as quiet; it stars Florence Loiret as Amélie, a girl who loses her job and falls through the cracks. In both films, the central character's drift into crime is hardly a choice at all, let alone the fulfillment of a wicked ambition; Zonca's young people are simply hauled downward by the force of social gravity. You come away feeling blasted, yet not depressed. The deftness of the direction, and the dedicated performers, make you feel as though you've grappled with authentic lives. In French.—*A.L.* (3/6/00) (Film Forum.)

MAGNOLIA
In Paul Thomas Anderson's new movie, the characters break down, fall apart, and denounce themselves and others. "Magnolia" consists of multiple vignettes set in the San Fernando Valley, but since there's no common theme, the picture becomes a kind of mad crackup derby. Much of the material is earnest Arthur Miller-type stuff about how we can't escape the past, we can't escape the evil we've done, we all need to be truthful with one another, and so on. The ideas are banal, but Anderson ("Boogie Nights") plays each sequence in real time and cuts among them with remarkable fluency, and the actors have some tremendous arialike moments—especially Julianne Moore as an adulterous young wife, John C. Reilly as an angelic cop looking for love, and Tom Cruise as some sort of sex guru who hosts a cable-TV show called "Seduce and Destroy." With Jason Robards, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and William H. Macy.—*D.D.* (12/20/99) (Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Square, Sutton 1 and 2, and Union Square.)

NOT ONE LESS
In a rural Chinese village, a thirteen-year-old student (Wei Minzhi) becomes an emergency substitute teacher. When one of her charges, a ten-year-old boy, leaves to find work in a vast, nameless city nearby, she abandons her post, and sets out to find

March 17, 1997 | THE COOLHUNT
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January 11, 1999 | SIX DEGREES OF LOIS WEISBERG
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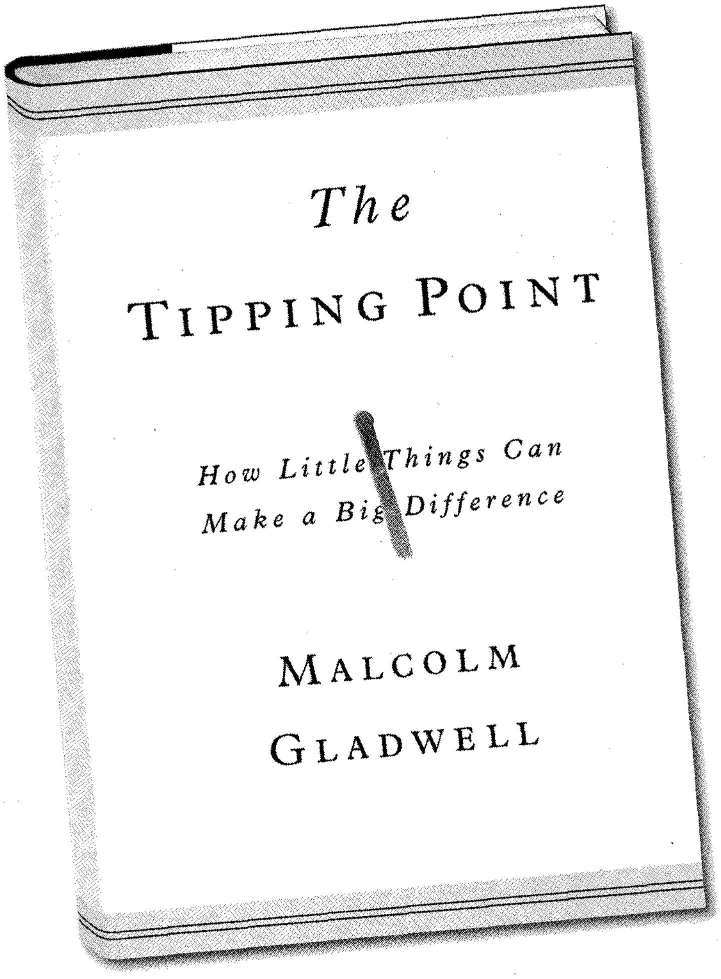

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him. The great Chinese director Zhang Yimou shot this film in a style that might be called austere fabulism. He uses documentary techniques—casting nonactors and presenting the raw concrete walls and dirt roads in all their authentic ugliness. Yet the story is shaped like a fable from the silent-film days, and one gets caught up in it. It becomes a slow-motion chase movie, and the persistence of the young teacher gives the film a tone of hilarious monomania. Intentionally or not (it's hard for an outsider to tell), Zhang reveals the meanness and impersonality of contemporary Chinese society.—*D.D.* (2/21-28/00) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema.)

THE SIXTH SENSE
A delicate, emotionally attentive, but very scary ghost story. In a Philadelphia drained of color and life, a shrink (Bruce Willis) who specializes in childhood anxieties becomes obsessed with one of his patients, a suffering nine-year-old boy (Haley Joel Osment) who "sees" dead people. The movie, written and directed by the young, Indian-born M. Night Shyamalan, consists mostly of long conversations between Willis, who is usually silent and very patient, and Osment, who may be an acting genius. Despite an occasional hackneyed moment, the movie is an admirable attempt at injecting some honest feeling into a curdled commercial genre, and it pays off in the end with a genuine shock that leaves one amazed.—*D.D.* (8/23-30/99) (Criterion Center, East 86th Street Cinemas, Murray Hill Cinemas, and Village East Cinemas.)

Opening March 10 at The Screening Room, "Midnight," directed by Daniela Thomas and Walter Salles.

EDEL RODRIGUEZ

SWEET AND LOWDOWN
Sean Penn, in cream-colored suits and matching hat, a cigarette dangling from his lips, gives one of the best performances ever seen in a Woody Allen film. He plays Emmet Ray, the notorious (and made-up) jazz guitarist from the thirties, a great artist who was also a worm and a loser. Emmet handles his instrument almost as well as his idol Django Reinhardt, but he's the victim of his own neuroses and obsessions. His not knowing himself at all is turned into a joke, but it's also played for pathos—incomprehension is Emmet's soulfulness, mysteriously linked to his elegant playing. The picture is made up of short vignettes framed by "memories" of Emmet spoken by various experts, including Allen himself, and the entire movie is caught in the loving grip of jazz-world nostalgia, with its stylized glamour of thirties clothes and cars—the tawdry life on the road, in which the greatest art was made on the run. With the English actress Samantha Morton, hatted and crumpet-faced, her body hidden in a shapeless dress, as the mute girl who falls for Emmet. Golden-hued cinematography by Zhao Fei. The contemporary guitarists Howard Alden and Bucky Pizzarelli do the playing. In all, one of Allen's finest achievements.—*D.D.* (12/6/99) (First & 62nd Cinemas, Union Square, and Waverly.)

TOPSY-TURVY
Mike Leigh's brilliant re-creation of the most famous partnership in the British theatre—the collaboration of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan in the glory era of imperial rule. There are elements here of a traditional bio-pic—failure, triumph, intimations of immortality—but none of the stodginess and self-congratulation that usually plague the form. Sullivan (Allan Corduner), a libertine who nevertheless had serious pretensions as a composer, and Gilbert (Jim Broadbent), formal, irascible, and asexual, but a great theatrical pro, are so dissimilar in temperament that they can hardly bear each other's company. Leigh suggests that the combination of sentimental languor and incisiveness produced the art of "The Mikado," whose preparation and first performance take up the second half of the movie. The authentic period stage lighting produces a glow on the painted faces; the fragile beauty of Sullivan's tunes is piercing when they are played, as they are here, at slower tempos than we are used to hearing. In all, one of the greatest movies about the theatre. With Lesley Manville, Timothy Spall, Ron Cook, and Wendy Nottingham.—*D.D.* (12/27/99-1/3/00) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Paris, and Village Theatre VII.)

WHAT PLANET ARE YOU FROM?
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (Art Greenwich Twin, 42nd Street E Walk, and Kips Bay Theatre.)

THE WHOLE NINE YARDS
Matthew Perry, who is sometimes the only thing that keeps "Friends" on its toes, attempts yet another leap to the big screen. He plays a Montreal dentist whose next-door neighbor (Bruce Willis) turns out to be a hit man hiding from the Mob. Throw in a deep-voiced heavy (Michael Clarke Duncan) and a couple of fiercely disappointed wives (Rosanna Arquette and Natasha Henstridge), and soon everyone wants to kill somebody else. Perry and Willis—the scared and the smooth—are not a bad pairing, and Perry gets the chance for some jerky slapstick (he bounces off Clarke Duncan as if off a vast rubber wall), but the film is too hectic and scattershot to give the actors much room. Visually, this may be the dingiest film of the year so far, although Amanda Peet, in her role as a death-crazed dental assistant, cheers things up considerably. The director is Jonathan Lynn, who doesn't quite have the courage to carry off this black comedy; the mood of loving contentment which triumphs at the end feels like an insult.—*A.L.* (3/6/00) (Chelsea Cinemas, Coronet Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Orpheum VII, and Union Square.)

WONDER BOYS
A pleasant dud from director Curtis Hanson and screenwriter Steve Kloves. Michael Douglas plays Grady Tripp, pothead campus novelist and hero to undergraduates, who cannot finish his new book and gets drawn into all kinds of social complications. Douglas gives a surprisingly mild and rueful performance, but the movie has very little dramatic interest and quickly slides into whimsy. The vibrant Frances McDormand is the university's chancellor, with whom Tripp is having an affair; Tobey Maguire is a maddeningly elusive writing student who may or may not have talent; and Robert Downey, Jr., drifting through a fey, meaningless performance, is a visiting New York book editor. "Wonder Boys" isn't sloppy; it's been made with love, but one looks at it in bewilderment, amazed that so much care has been taken with desultory material that seems all wrong for the movies. Adapted from Michael Chabon's novel.—*D.D.* (2/21-28/00) (Coronet Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.)

ALSO PLAYING

ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER (1/22/99)
Angelika Film Center, BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, Eastside Playhouse, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.

AMERICAN BEAUTY (9/17/99)
Beekman, 84th Street Sixplex, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, Olympia I and II, State, and Village Theatre VII.

DROWNING MONA
42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, New York Twin, and Village Theatre VII.

HANGING UP
42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII.

HOLY SMOKE (1/17/00)
Angelika Film Center, Cinema 3rd Avenue, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.

THE HURRICANE (1/10/00)
Criterion Center, First & 62nd Cinemas, and Union Square.

MIFUNE
Art Greenwich Twin and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.

THE NEXT BEST THING
42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 72nd Street East, and Village Theatre VII.

REAR WINDOW
First & 62nd Cinemas and The Screening Room.

REINDEER GAMES
42nd Street E Walk, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, Olympia I and II, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.

THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY (12/27/99-1/3/00)
East 85th Street, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Union Square.

THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
Art Greenwich Twin, Greenwich Ave. at 12th St.
Astor Plaza, 44th St. at Broadway.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770).
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinema I, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema II, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema 3rd Avenue, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3363).
Coronet Cinemas, Third Ave. at 59th St.
Criterion Center, Broadway at 44th St.
East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.

Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

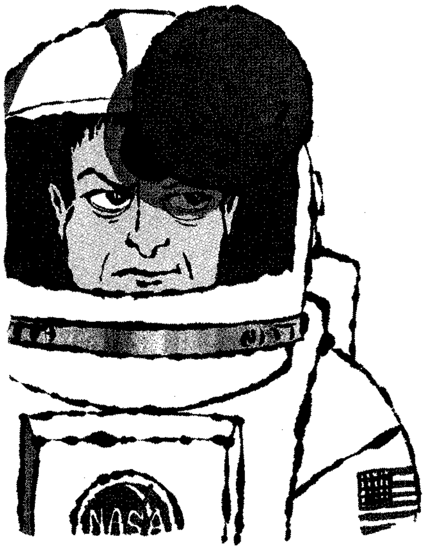
REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—March 10 at 7: A screening of "Joe Gould's Secret" (2000, Stanley Tucci), which is based on two *New Yorker* profiles by Joseph Mitchell, followed by a discussion with the director, at the DGA Theatre, 110 W. 57th St. ♦ The films of Steve Martin. March 11 at 2: "All of Me" (1984, Carl Reiner). ♦ March 11 at 4: "Roxanne" (1987, Fred Schepisi). ♦ March 12 at 2: "L.A. Story" (1991, Mick Jackson). ♦ March 12 at 4: "The Spanish Prisoner" (1997, David Mamet).

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110)—March 8-14: "The 7th Annual New York Underground Film Festival." March 9 at 5:45: "Black & Gold: The Latin King and Queen Nation" (1999, Richard Rowley and Jacqui Soohen). ♦ March 9 at 6:15: "The Love Machine" (1999, Gordon Eriksen). ♦ March 9 at 7:30: "Untitled #29.95" (1999, the Video Aktivists) and "The Target Shoots First" (1999, Christopher Wilcha). ♦ March 9 at 9:15: "The Shield Around the K" (1999, Heather Rose Dominic). ♦ March 10 at 5:45: "A Sudden Loss of Gravity" (1999, Todd Verow). ♦ March 10 at 6:15: "Amerikan Passport" (1999, Reed Paget). ♦ March 10 at 9:15: "Skate or Die Harder!," a collection of skateboarding shorts. ♦ March 10 at 11: "Liquid Sky" (1982, Slava Tsukerman). ♦ March 11 at 4: "Migrating Forms" (1999, James Fotopoulos). ♦ March 11 at 5:45: "American Gypsy: A Stranger in Everybody's Land" (1999, Jasmine Dellal). ♦ March 11 at 7:30: "Bookwars" (1999, Jason Rosette). ♦ March 12 at 9:15: "Godass" (1999, Esther Bell). ♦ For a complete schedule of the features, documentaries, and shorts being screened at the festival, go to http://www.nyuff.com.

EDWIN FOTHERINGHAM



Opening March 10, Brian De Palma's "Mission to Mars."

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—Through April 6: The "Neo-Noir" film festival. March 8: "The Killer" (†) and "Fallen Angels" (1997, Wong Kar-wai). ♦ March 9: "The Outfit" (1974, John Flynn) and "One False Move" (1992, Carl Franklin). ♦ March 10-11: "The Naked Kiss" (1964, Sam Fuller) and "Who Killed Teddy Bear?" (1965, Joseph Cates). ♦ March 12-13: "Reservoir Dogs" (1992, Quentin Tarantino) and "Killing Zoe" (1994, Roger Avery). ♦ March 14: "Klute" (†) and "Cruising" (1980, William Friedkin).

FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (355-6160)—March 14 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "Le Hussard sur le Toit" (1995, Jean-Paul Rappeneau; in French).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—"From Automatic Vaudeville to the Seventh Art: Cinema's Silent Years, 1893-1928." March 9 at 2:30: "Nana" (1926, Jean Renoir). ♦ March 10 at 2:30 and March 11 at 5: "Metropolis" (1926, Fritz Lang). ♦ March 10 at 6: "The Scar of Shame" (1926, Frank Perugini). ♦ March 11 at 2: "Mother" (1926, Vsevolod Pudovkin). ♦ March 11 at 2: "Ella Cinders" (1926, Alfred E. Green). ♦ March 12 at 2 and March 14 at 6: "Earth" (1930, Alexander Dovzhenko). ♦ March 12 at 5 and March 13 at 2:30: "Zvenigora" (1928, Dovzhenko). ♦ March 13 at 6 and March 14 at 2:30: "Arsenal" (1929, Dovzhenko). ♦ March 14 at 6: "Les Deux Timides" (1929, René Clair). ♦ Academy Award-nominated films. March 10 at 6:30: "Caravans" (1999, Eric Valli; in Tibetan and German). ♦ A tribute to the C.N.C. French Film Archives. March 11 at 5: "The Magic of Méliès" (1997, Jacques Mény).

SYMPHONY SPACE
2537 Broadway (864-1414)—The films of John Waters and Pedro Almodóvar. March 14 at 7: "Serial Mom" (1994, Waters). ♦ March 7 at 8:45: "Multiple Maniacs" (1971, Waters).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—Through March 19: "Rendez-Vous with French Cinema Today," a selection of contemporary French films. March 10 at 1 and 6:15 and March 11 at 4:45: "My Little Business" (1999, Pierre Jolivet; in French). ♦ March 10 at 3:30 and 9: "La Dilettante" (1999, Pascal Thomas; in French). ♦ March 11 at 2 and March 12 at 9:30: "Chin Up!" (1999, Solveig Anspach; in French). ♦ March 11 at 7 and March 14 at 1: "The Children of the Marshland" (1998, Jean Becker; in French). ♦ March 11 at 9:30 and March 12 at 4:45: "La Bûche" (1999, Danièle Thompson; in French). ♦ March 12 at 2: "Perhaps" (1999, Cédric Klapisch; in French). ♦ March 12 at 7 and March 14 at 3:30: "I'm Not Afraid of Life" (1999, Noemie Lvovsky; in French). ♦ March 14 at 9: "Belle Maman" (1999, Gabriel Aghion; in French).

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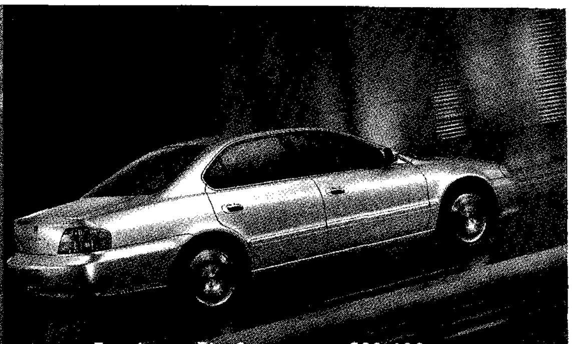

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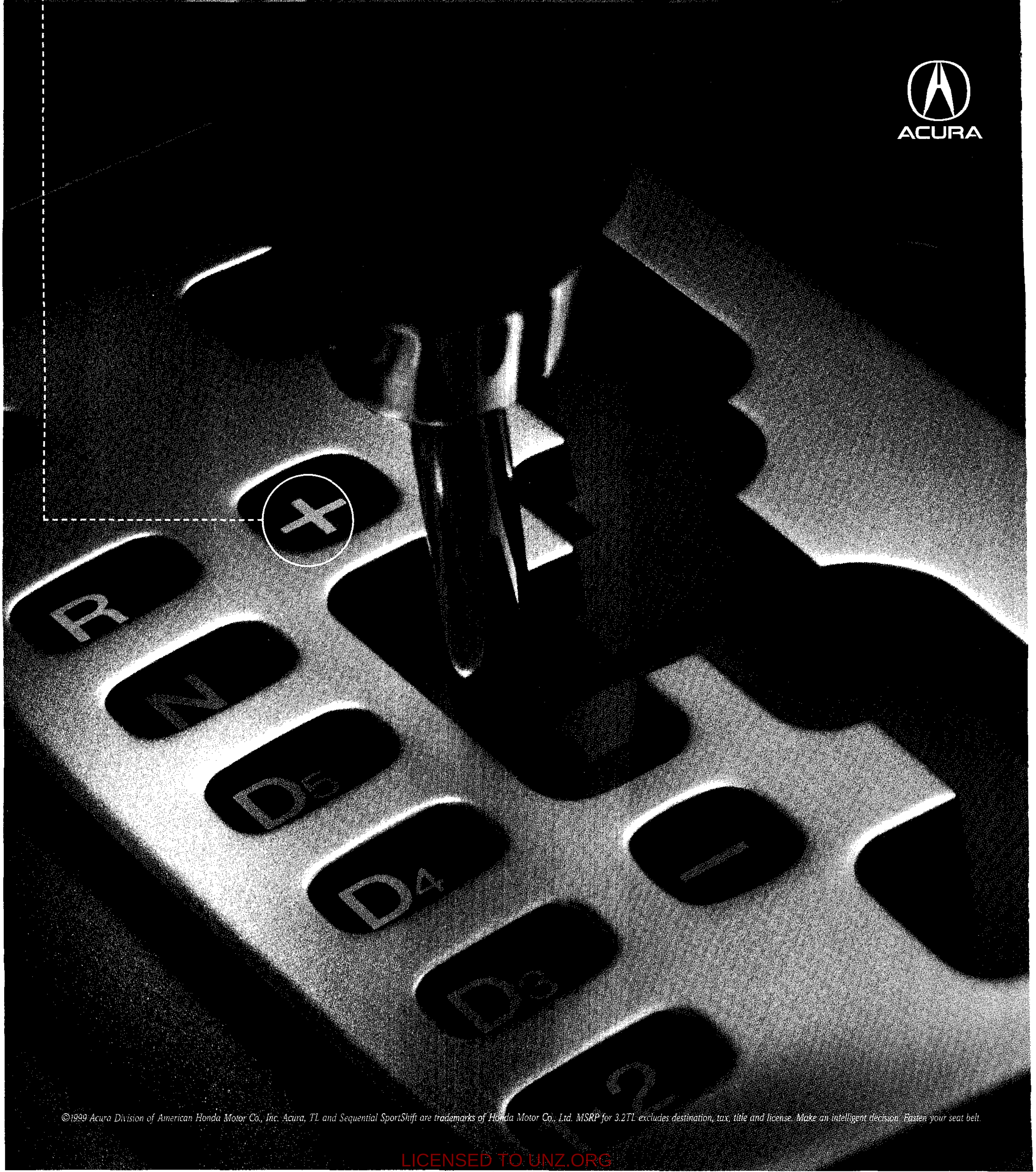

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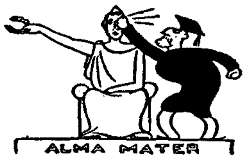
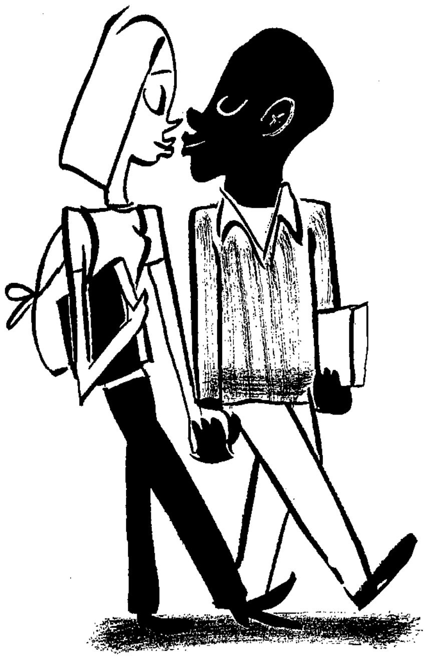
BAD NEWS FOR BIGOTS



In American politics, weirdness is routine. Still, it was more than routinely weird that, as the Presidential primary campaign approached its climax, the struggle for the most powerful political office on earth found itself zeroing in on the moral peculiarities of an improbable educational institution by the improbable name of Bob Jones University. George W. Bush certainly didn't plan it that way. When his advance people lit on the Bob Jones campus as a good site for a South Carolina rally, they intended little more than a nod to Christian conservatives, or at most a roguish wink. Republican pols from Ronald Reagan to Dan Quayle had given speeches there. John McCain's own state chairman was a graduate of the place. No big whoop, right? Big mistake: all hell (a very real place in the Bob Jones scheme of things) broke loose. And all that hell—volcanoes of negative ads and push-polls, bubbling cauldrons of racial and religious divisiveness, sulfuric hysteria in the Republican ranks—provoked plenty of heated commentary, largely of the isn't-it-deplorable variety. But the controversy also showed that, beneath the surface and over time, there has been a tectonic change in American attitudes toward race—a change that deserves to be noticed and celebrated.

As the world knows, Bob Jones University had, until last weekend, a "policy" against interracial dating. Bush's failure to denounce that policy on the spot was a moral mistake. Bush, however, wasn't the only dog that didn't bark. Throughout the entire controversy, not a peep was heard in *defense* of the ban. A few prominent Christian conservatives defended what might be called Bob Jones's right to choose, but none expressed sympathy with the ban itself. Conservative politicians, when asked, responded with something approaching unanimity. If they didn't always speak with McCainian passion ("This ban on interracial dating is stupid, it's idiotic, and it is incredibly cruel," the Senator said), they spoke plainly enough. The comment of Asa Hutchinson—congressman from Arkansas, House impeachment manager, and Bob Jones graduate, Class of '72—was fairly typical. "The fact is," Hutchinson said, "you have an indefensible policy at Bob Jones University."



In other words, interracial dating (and all that it implies) has become so respectable that the most conservative, not to say reactionary, elements in American society feel it incumbent upon them to accept and even embrace it. This may seem unremarkable until one reflects how far it was from being the case a generation or two ago, when miscegenation was racism's trump card and even the most enlightened Americans, black and white, took it for granted that sexual fear was its unkillable heart. Civil-rights leaders thought it politic to assure the white public that their movement was not aimed at "social"—i.e., sexual—integration. The makers of "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," which came out in 1967, were so worried about the explosiveness of their story of interracial romance that they loaded the dice by making the Sidney Poitier character a brilliant research physician. Cross-racial coupling is now so common on the screen (even the small screen) that it sometimes happens between unsympathetic characters.

This is not to say that black-white dating and marriage are without their special discomforts; any interracial cou-

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

ple can attest to the contrary. But there has been a huge change for the better. Last year, the Alabama legislature voted unanimously to remove an anti-miscegenation clause (the nation's last, and already a dead letter, thanks to a 1967 Supreme Court decision) from the state's post-Reconstruction constitution. It's up to the voters to make the removal final in a November referendum. The margin probably won't be close. A recent Atlanta *Journal-Constitution* poll found that nearly two-thirds of Southern whites and more than nine-tenths of Southern blacks approve of interracial marriage. A quarter of the whites and half the blacks told the pollsters that such a marriage had actually taken place in their own families.

Although Bob Jones has now abruptly got religion where rainbow romance is concerned, it remains steeped in another mortal sin: anti-Catholicism. And in the reaction to this, too, there is encouragement to be found. On its Web site—which, in accordance with what is apparently a campus tradition of risible nomenclature, is www.bju.edu—the university explained that its position is simply a matter of trying to save Catholics (and Jews, and Muslims, and liberal Protestants, and so on) from the fiery pit:

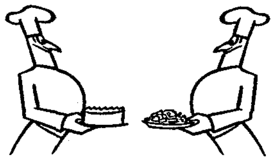
> Our shame would be in telling people a lie, and thereby letting them go to hell without Christ because we loved their goodwill more than we loved them and their souls.
>
> If there are those who wish to charge us with being anti-Catholicism, we plead guilty. . . . All religion, including Catholicism, which teaches that salvation is by religious works or church dogma is false. . . . We love the practicing Catholic and earnestly desire to see him accept the Christ of the Cross, leave the false system that has enslaved his soul, and enjoy the freedom of sins forgiven that is available for any of us in Christ alone.

Bob Jones is essentially alone in clinging publicly to this sort of thing. Evangelicals and fundamentalists have rushed to disassociate themselves from the school's anti-Catholicism, and among conservative politicians the stampede to condemn it has been deafening. In large part, no doubt, this reflects an anxiety to maintain the anti-abortion political alliance with the Catholic Church. But it also suggests a willingness to place a higher value on commonalities of belief than on the jagged edges of religious doctrine. In 1960, Protestant divines ranging from Billy Graham to Martin Luther King, Sr., called for John F. Kennedy's defeat on religious grounds. Forty years later, religious prejudice, which never carried quite the sting of racism, has never been weaker. Only nonbelievers are left out of the atmosphere of ecumenical warmth: it is inconceivable that a professed atheist or agnostic could be elected President today, and even an unchurched Deist like Jefferson wouldn't stand a chance.

The likely truth is that most people, including most people who regard themselves as observantly religious, simply don't believe in the sort of God who would subject a virtuous person to eternal torture just because he or she believes in salvation through works rather than through grace, or vice versa (or doesn't believe in salvation at all). Whether this counts as a gain or a loss for true Christianity is for Christians, not secular magazines, to say. But it is certainly a gain for mercy, "and mercy rejoiceth against judgment."

—*Hendrik Hertzberg*

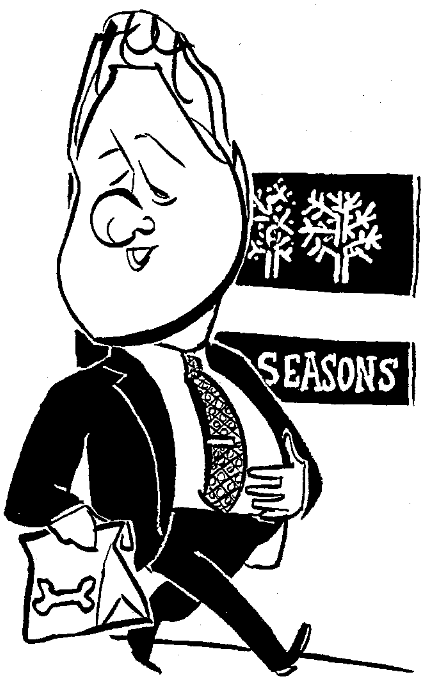
TABLE TALK
THE FAST-FOOD PRESIDENT GOES HAUTE CUISINE



Julian Niccolini, a managing partner in the Four Seasons restaurant, was taken aback to read in the *Times* the other day a lengthy account of an elaborate dinner—lobster salad with caviar-cream dressing, a duo of stuffed saddle and roasted rack of lamb with tomato-spinach compote and rosemary-lemon polenta, apple tarte tatin—prepared for President Clinton by the restaurant Daniel on a recent Thursday evening. Niccolini's surprise derived from the fact that the very same evening his restaurant had prepared a similarly elaborate dinner—tuna tartare with beluga caviar, roast filet of lamb with truffle sauce and sautéed spring vegetables, a dish of mixed berries—for the President, which had been consumed with gusto. "After the main course, he cleaned his plate with bread," Niccolini explained, speaking in the Grill Room one afternoon last week.

The President's appetites, for cream puffs as well as for comestibles, have caused him considerable embarrassment over the years, and even though he was reported to be looking svelte on the evening in question, it appears that his voraciousness remains undiminished. Clinton was at Daniel for less than an hour, and he spent twenty minutes delivering a speech to the dinner guests—sixty-six members of the Democratic National Committee. Nonetheless, according to Anthony Francis, the restaurant's banquet director, he managed to eat every scrap of his appetizer and his main course. (He ordered his tarte tatin to go.) The President was then driven thirteen blocks south, to the Four Seasons, where he settled in for a three-hour blowout and gabfest, eventually leaving for Chappaqua—with another doggie bag, containing a slice of Key-lime pie—at twelve-forty-five in the morning.

After a physical last September, when he weighed in at two hundred and fourteen pounds, the President expressed a wish to drop ten pounds, and was reported to be trying to stick to a regimen of low-fat meals and no late-night snacking. Clinton's staff had presented the Four Seasons kitchen with a list of dietary restrictions. "They told us exactly what he likes, what he doesn't like," Niccolini said. "And he is not allowed to have chocolate or cheese." A Presidential taster was stationed in the kitchen, to in-



Bill Clinton

sure that the food was prepared in accordance with Clinton's preferences.

Even so, an approximate nutritional analysis of the President's two dinners indicates that he had better duck next time he's in danger of running into the surgeon general, since he is far from meeting the recommended caloric intake for a man of his height and activity level, which would be about twenty-eight hundred calories a day. The meal at Daniel cost him around two thousand calories and included about a hundred and twenty grams of fat, or sixty per cent of calories from fat. (That's twice as much fat as most nutritionists recommend as a daily percentage.) The meal at the Four Seasons was slightly more spa-like and totalled about twelve hundred calories, with perhaps fifty per cent of those coming from fat. Even if the President had spent the whole day starving himself in preparation—which is as easy to imagine as him endorsing Giuliani for the Senate—he still would have consumed approximately thirty-two hundred calories. That's nearly ten hours of non-stop golfing right there.

People fearing for the First Waistline might seek comfort in the fact that the President asked for his desserts in a doggie bag, but it appears that they were not destined to make it to Buddy's bowl. Niccolini said he did not feel snubbed that the President declined the Four Seasons pie (five hundred calories, thirty fat grams) in favor of berries. "The plan was that we were supposed to bring his dessert to the limousine," Niccolini said. "I guess he wanted to eat it on the way home. It's almost an hour to Chappaqua. At least it gave him something to do in the car."

—*Rebecca Mead*

GIFFORD ANKLES REGIS FOR CZECH TOP SPOT

Feb. 29th: Kathie Lee Gifford announced today that she was stepping down as the co-host of "Live! With Regis and Kathie Lee," telling her studio audience, "It's time for me to pursue a lifelong ambition: to be elected President of the Czech Republic."

Most observers of the entertainment business expressed surprise at Ms. Gifford's desire to run in the next Czech election, but few counted her out. "People thought she would bomb when she filled in for Carol Burnett in 'Putting It Together,' but she knocked that sucker out of the park," said Jeffrey Hornell, of the *Hollywood Reporter*. "And, once you've sat in David Letterman's chair, being President of a Middle European nation should be a piece of cake."

Hornell added, "Kathie Lee has done TV, Broadway, and records, but I think somewhere deep down there's that little voice inside her saying, 'I'm not in NATO.' "

A source close to Gifford expects her to tap her "Putting It Together" co-star, Bronson Pinchot, to be the new Czech Prime Minister. "She said that the cute foreign accent Bronson used to do on 'Perfect Strangers' sounded kind of Czech to her," the source said.

Gifford's elevation to the Presidency would follow in the tradition of showbiz vets helming the Czech Republic: its current President, Václav Havel, is a former playwright. Havel, who is stepping down in 2002, hopes to segue into TV writing, and recently told associates that he would be very interested in working on "Dawson's Creek."

—*Andy Borowitz*

ON THE AIRWAVES
JONATHAN SCHWARTZ RETURNS TO THE FM DIAL

Unless you are Jonathan Schwartz, Judy Garland probably never came up to your room when you were a child and sang "Over the Rainbow" to lull you to sleep. And if you had a penchant for sneaking into your neighbors' houses, because you were often lonely, one of the houses you sneaked into was probably not Gene Kelly's. ("Beverly Hills was so insulated by its mythology that everything was unlocked," Schwartz says.) Schwartz's father, Arthur Schwartz, was one of the small band of songwriters who in the thirties and forties led classic New York lives and classic Hollywood lives, like something out of the very musicals they created. Schwartz *fils* was born in New York in 1938, and lived in Beverly Hills from 1940 until 1947, when the family moved back to New York. But, as radio listeners in the city have known for more than thirty years, there is much more to him than his pedigree. (Still, his unusual childhood will play an important role in a memoir he is working on.)

Over the years, Schwartz has become well known for his deep, virtually encyclopedic knowledge of the Great American Songbook, and for his exponency of the singing of Frank Sinatra. (He has long had a weekly Saturday show devoted to Sinatra.) Schwartz is no staid keeper of the flame, though—he runs with the torch held high. And his definition of a standard is a generous one: he will play folk, jazz, and comedy recordings as well as songs by the usual suspects. Musically speaking, he has Chronic Lack of Fatigue Syndrome, and his chief presenting symptom is unrestrained enthusiasm.

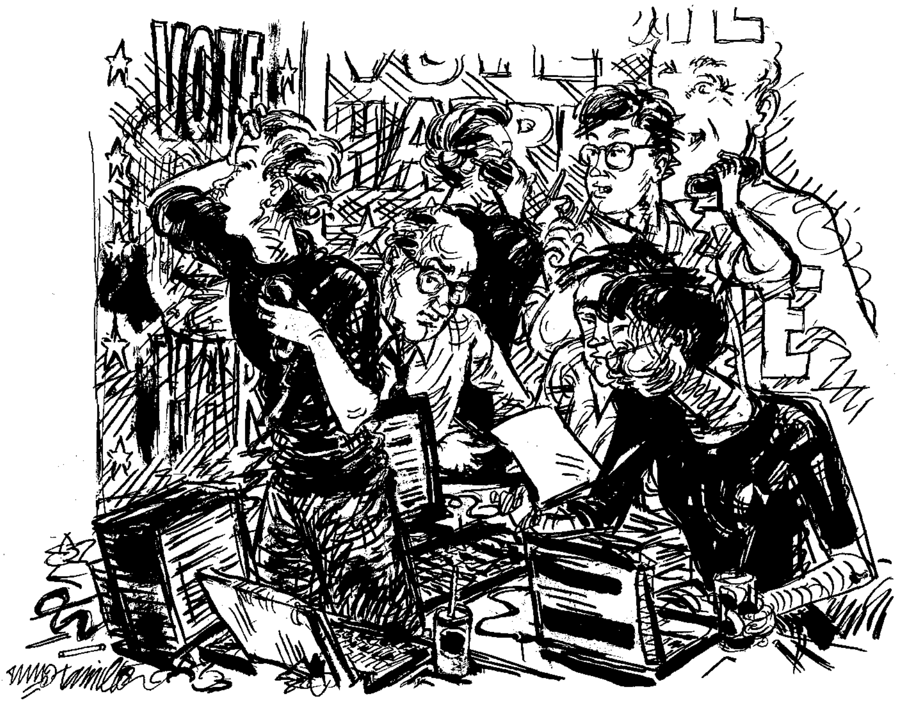
A few Saturdays ago, Schwartz inaugurated his first FM show in twenty-four years, on the public station WNYC. (From 1967 to 1976, he was a key voice on the rock station WNEW-FM.) The program, a version of the American-standards show he did on AM for decades, is broadcast live on Saturday and Sunday afternoons from noon to four, from a studio high in the imposing Municipal Building, which is also known as the place where New Yorkers go to have a civil wedding. (Bear in mind that city authorities are not responsible if the marriage doesn't remain civil.) When Schwartz is on the air, the only other regular presence in the studio is his friend and assistant Buddy Ladd. Before the broadcast, Ladd brought in three canvas tote bags filled with more or less random CDs from Schwartz's huge collection down the hall. (His Sinatra CDs alone number around three hundred.) Drawing on Buddy's bags, Schwartz makes up his show as he goes along. While Lynne Wintersteller's version of "Closer Than Ever" was playing, Schwartz said, "You know how I met Buddy? Years ago, when I was at WNEW-AM, it was June 28th—Richard Rodgers's birthday—and I was going to play every Rodgers song that Sinatra ever recorded. There were about five minutes left in the show. 'My Funny Valentine' was playing. I noticed one light lit up on the outside phone. And I picked it up, thinking someone would say, 'This is unbelievable, this is great!' Instead, a voice quietly said, 'You forgot "Glad to Be Unhappy."' As a result, we became friends. I'd never had any help with the show, ever. But then Buddy became my assistant. He's maniacally informed, in an irritating way."

To this day, Schwartz remains a blend of California and New York. He had a tan and was wearing a blue sweatshirt that said "Palm Springs" on it. Like a lot of Californians, he looks younger than his age. But he is also intense and highly verbal, and he goes off on lengthy tangents that might not be welcome in, say, a meeting with an impatient studio executive. Schwartz has a low, almost whispering voice, and a deep, quiet chuckle; these are some of the elements of his style that make his show feel so intimate. The title of one of his father's songs says it in a nutshell: you and he are "Alone Together." Schwartz is just as attuned to the sound of silence as he is to the sound of music. After he played "Go Leave," sung by Kate McGarrigle—"This may be the saddest song ever written," he said—he let several seconds of silence fill the air before turning to Stephane Grappelli's "If I Had You." "The idea, if it can be done, is to follow something like that with another record in the same key, so that, though no one may know I'm doing that, it's serenely satisfactory. In this case, I wanted a break because I wanted the silence of the room after 'Go Leave' to extend its virtues, so to speak." Schwartz's show always begins with five seconds of silence, "which has irritated program directors for thirty years," before he plays his opening theme, a short piece of music privately recorded a long time ago by someone he grew up with: Carly Simon.

During the broadcast, Schwartz, whose on-air free associations are a show in themselves, connected the dots between seemingly unrelated subjects. After doing a commercial for Gourmet Garage, he gave a five-minute seminar on avocados which included a reference to Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner's 2,000-Year-Old Man. He also made some spirited pronouncements: in regard to Oscar Hammerstein, "I would have to say that he is easily the most important person in American music in the twentieth century"; the song "Liaisons," from "A Little Night Music," is Sondheim's "greatest moment"; "They're Either Too Young or Too Old" is "maybe the best song to come out of World War II. Although there's a lot to be said for 'I Don't Want to Walk Without You.' Wait a minute—you know what the best song actually is? 'The Last Time I Saw Paris.'"

When the show was over, Fred Child, the station's director of cultural programming, came into the studio with a bottle of champagne and some paper cups, and the gesture made Schwartz drunk with happiness. "Oh, good! How perfect! How wonderful! Oh, my lord! Is this not extraordinary? Try *this*, Z100!"

—*Nancy Franklin*

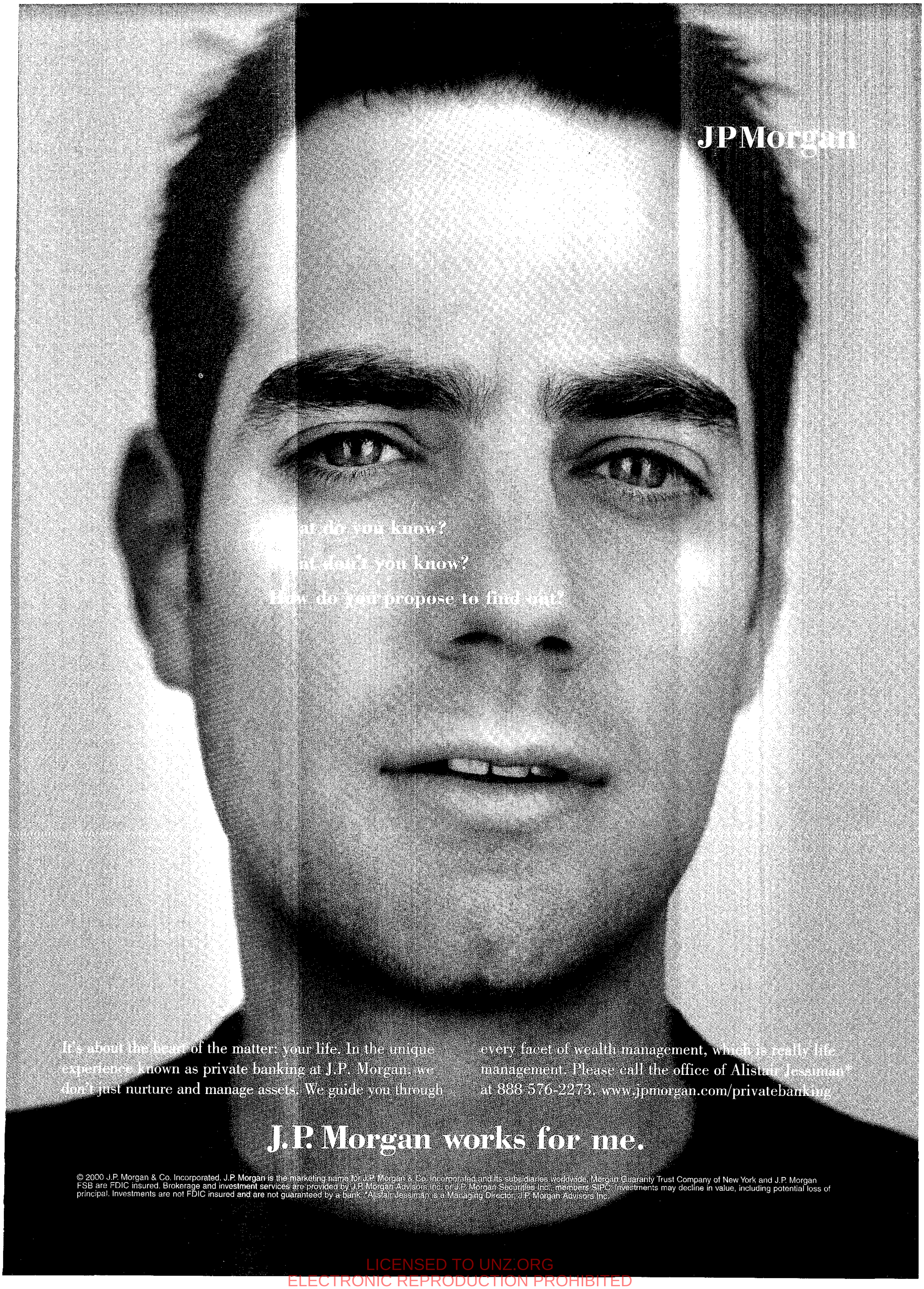


"He's coming across as Reaganish but not Reaganesque."

HANGOVER DEPT.
BURGUNDY ON THE HUDSON

Last month, Daniel Johnnes, the wine director at one of New York's most expensive restaurants, Montrachet (which is French for "Give me your wallet"), persuaded eighteen winemakers from Burgundy to come to New York to show off the subtleties of their stuff. There was a wine tasting in the afternoon, and a grand meal in the evening, and, in addition to the many wines on offer, in varying flamboyant sizes of extravagance (magnums, Methuselahs, and an unknown thing, poured by two people at once, that looked like a small tanker truck), there were bottles brought by the guests, a hidden admission cost that resulted in there being quite a lot to drink.

The evening, which was called La Paulée de New York, and was inspired by the harvest festival in France (it remains unclear what harvest was being celebrated in midtown in the month of February), was organized around the cooking of several notable chefs. The entertainment was provided by Les Cadets de Bourgogne, and consisted of a dozen old men singing an oompah-pah song every ten or fifteen minutes, which sounded like a French interpretation of the hokey-pokey. In their version, you stand up, and then, rather than putting your left foot in, or your right foot out,



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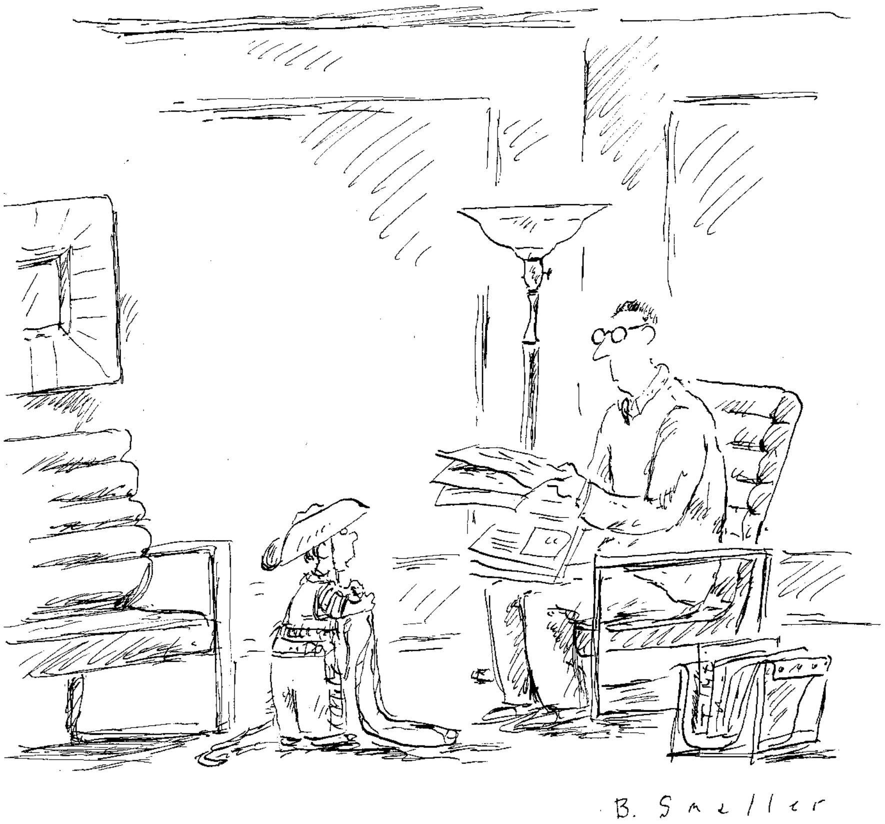


"Well, if I can't be a cowboy I'll be a lawyer for cowboys."

• •

you merely flash your hands in one direction, and flash your hands in another, and then clap a few times. It didn't seem particularly subtle, given that subtlety was the theme of the evening. Red Burgundy is made from the Pinot Noir grape, and its qualities are not always immediately apparent, especially to Americans, who tend to like wines made with the much heartier Cabernet Sauvignon. Cabernet has American virtues—forthright, not fancy, and distinguished by its irrepressible sunny disposition. Cabernet also has the distinction of smelling like a grape. Pinot Noir, which is grown in misery and mildewy dampness and tends to rot, is altogether different. Its distinction is not in what it tastes like but in what it smells like, and in its greatest examples that smell is described euphemistically as "barnyard." Great Burgundies, that is, smell of cow shit.

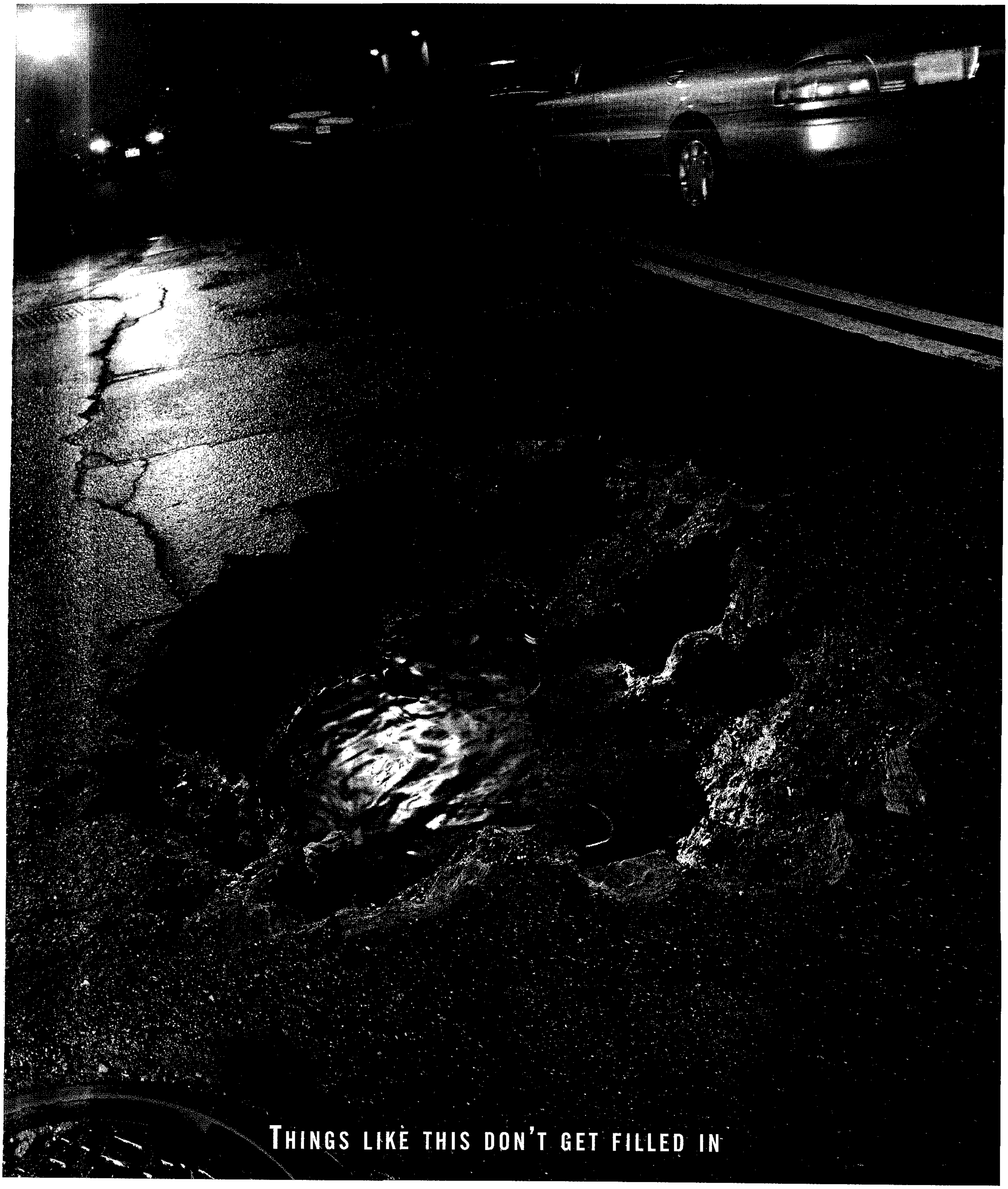
Any of this could be learned from one of the great winemakers scattered around the room. The most distinguished was Dominique Lafon, the cool, blond, thin, aristocratic son of René Lafon, who was, in turn, the grandson of Jules Lafon, who was, as it happens, the inventor of this very festival. The Lafons make a Burgundy so exquisite that you can't find it in New York. In any case, subtlety turned out not to be the theme of the evening, which was evident to anyone lucky enough to be seated next to one of the great winemakers. ("Psst," Daniel Johnnes was overheard saying, "you're next to Dominique Lafon. Congratulations. I'm counting on seeing some party tricks in return.") Party tricks? The real objective of the evening, it was becoming evident, was not to educate anybody in anything but merely to take work-obsessed, mineral-water-drinking, gym-going New Yorkers and render them blotto and legless.

It would be impossible to know how many different wines were drunk, and for a very good reason: by the end of the evening, few people could count. There were scorecards in evidence (pieces of paper with scratch marks), and every now and then a label that, in the damp, gurgled air, had fallen off one of the bottles. For instance, there was some sprayed-upon wrinkled thing from one of Dominique Lafon's ancient bottles, a 1967 something, or maybe it was a 1917 something—whatever it was, it was blurry, or somebody was. Or slurry. Something. Furry, maybe. And there was Dominique Lafon himself, no longer looking quite so aristocratic, standing on his chair and leading everyone in a new round of the French hokey-pokey, which was starting to sound impressively subtle after all. "It's a bit like Chopin, innit?" somebody said. The wine, though, seemed to be losing some of its subtlety. In fact, by that point in the evening, after fifty different examples of the stuff (or was it sixty?), it was a bit like stewed fruit. Stewed fruit that smelled of cow shit.

The education of the evening turned out to be in the benefit auction at the end. Now, there's a strategy: get a bunch of wealthy New Yorkers blindingly blitzo-blotto and then sell them something. The bidding started off sensibly enough. A magnum of Montrachet was sold for eight thousand dollars. That's about seven hundred dollars a glass. The purchaser was an eye surgeon, who made so much money that he worked only on Mondays and Tuesdays and read wine catalogues the rest of the week. Nice life. Things started to get a little crazy when a lunch with the wine guru Robert Parker went for twenty thousand dollars. But that was only lunch. The next item was a dinner, cooked in your home by the chef Daniel Boulud. That was it: dinner at home. The first bid was ten thousand dollars, placed by a big bald man with a long cigar, who then thumped his chest and made a kind of *ugh* sound. This was raised immediately to twenty thousand dollars by a man with an even larger chest. He then high-fived his neighbor and roared. This was raised—well, you get the idea. There was a lot of manly noise. Unusually, it ended in a draw (very gentlemanly), with the two barrel chests offering forty thousand dollars each.

By the close, there was a feeling that a moment in European-American relations had been witnessed, in which the French behaved like the French and the affluent New Yorkers were irretrievably themselves. There were other feelings, too—illness, double vision, and a furry, slurry, blurry thing that was not a good feeling at all.

—Bill Buford



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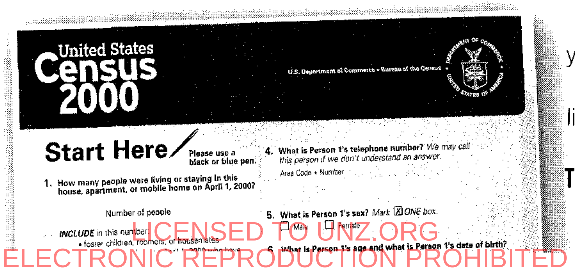
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Start Here Please use a black or blue pen.

1. How many people were living or staying in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2000?

Number of people

INCLUDE in this number:
- foster children, roomers, or housemates

4. What is Person 1's telephone number? *We may call this person if we don't understand an answer.*

Area Code + Number

5. What is Person 1's sex? *Mark* ☒ *ONE box.*
☐ Male ☐ Female

6. What is Person 1's age and what is Person 1's date of birth?

THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

KAMIKAZE

Have the Republicans done themselves in?

BY JOE KLEIN

The campaign day had been endless, a coast-to-coast rush through four states and three time zones after the most important speech of John McCain's life, and now, nearly twenty hours later, there was yet another dense crowd cheering, in a brightly lit airport hangar in Redding, California. The tableau—the throng, the streamers, the flags, the balloons—seemed a mirage, floating into view as McCain's chartered jet neared the end of a rainy runway, deep in the night. The plane had landed with a thud, jolting the candidate out of a fitful half sleep; McCain, his wife, and his top aides—who camp out in distressingly public fashion, in an exit row, smack in the middle of a hundred journalists—had all closed their eyes immediately after takeoff from the last event, a rally in Tacoma, Washington. They had been bouncing back and forth across the country for nearly a week; there hadn't been much chance to sleep. And now another performance. McCain's eyes were red-rimmed; he'd had trouble getting his mouth to work properly in Tacoma—indeed, he'd been almost incoherent with exhaustion. But there was something warming, and utterly unexpected, about this very late-night crowd in Redding. "We started this day," he said, beginning more slowly than is his custom, "in Virginia Beach, where I gave a noncontroversial speech that . . ."

The crowd exploded, interrupting McCain with cheers, and the candidate stopped in mid-sentence, surprised by the intensity of the response. He shook his head in amazement, then pushed on.

"You see that?" McCain whispered later, in the darkened plane, unable to get back to sleep. We sat across the aisle from each other. "They'd already heard about the speech! They knew!"

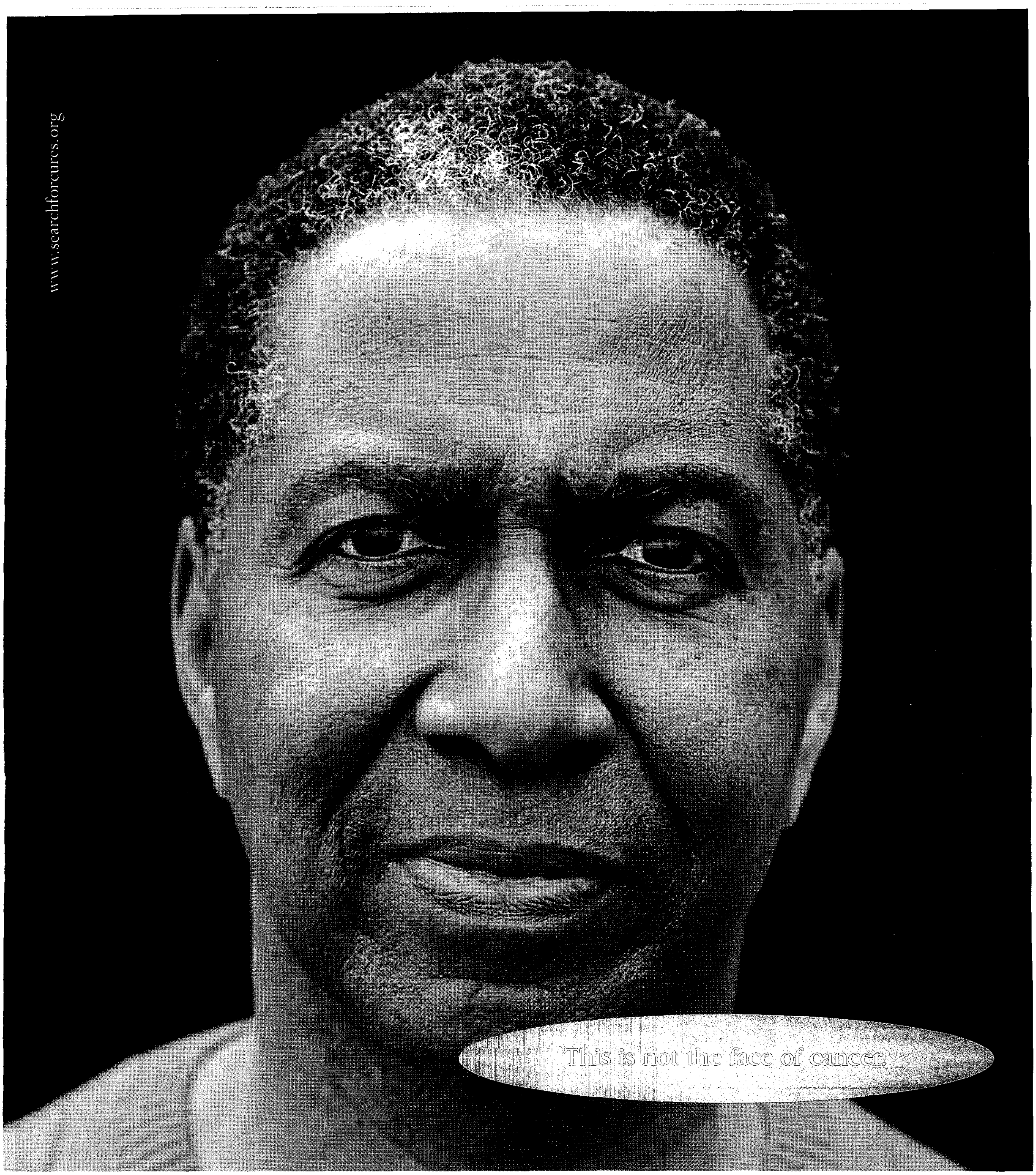
He had begun the day in Virginia Beach, with a remarkable assault on Pat Robertson and other selected shamans of political Christianity as "agents of intolerance." In retrospect, it seems clear that the McCain campaign had been heading toward such a moment: a climactic statement of either high principle or high dudgeon, depending on your point of view; a burning of bridges, an impolitic all-or-nothing gamble. McCain's crowds had been too large and his opponents too implacable; his increasing sense of his own righteousness (the overuse of the pronoun "I," as opposed to the more democratic "we," and of words like "crusade" and "revolution"), compounded by the lack of sleep, suggested that a titanic rant was looming. Actually, the speech was too eloquent to be called a rant, but it was hastily considered, and it was followed by some truly intemperate ad libs. (The next day, McCain called Robertson and Jerry Falwell "evil.") Over all, the performance provided an invaluable if somewhat unintentional demonstration of just what the nation might expect from a McCain Presidency: great courage and high-wire imprudence. And a distressing solipsism.

The Virginia Beach speech not only will serve to define John McCain's candidacy for all time but also may have sealed the fate of the Republican Party this year.

VICTOR JUHASZ

It is striking how personal McCain's Virginia Beach address was. He didn't bother to build a case against his opponents. Their main offense was that they had misrepresented him. The tone was an anguished howl: "I am a pro-life, pro-family fiscal conservative and advocate of a strong defense. And yet Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and a few Washington leaders of the pro-life movement call me an unacceptable Presidential candidate. They distort my pro-life positions and smear the reputations of my supporters. Why?"

And again, and again—the same essential point. He had been attacked unfairly. But what positions, exactly, had Pat Robertson taken, and enforced, which had led the Republican Party astray? The candidate didn't say. There was a slapdash carelessness to the whole thing—astonishing for a moment that not only will serve to define John McCain's candidacy for all time but also may have sealed the fate of the Republican Party this year.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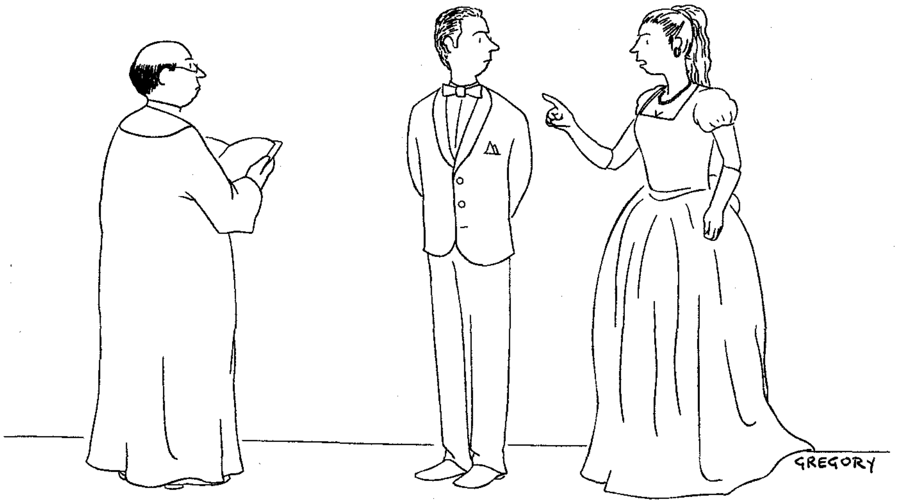

"Will the role of wife call for any nudity?"

• •

Perhaps the greatest irony about McCain's Virginia Beach speech is that a year ago the candidate who seemed most likely to issue such a challenge to Pat Robertson was George W. Bush. "You watch," a Bush adviser who'd had a history of dealing with religious conservatives told me. "We're going to surprise everyone by doing a 'Sister Souljah' with the religious right." He was referring to Bill Clinton's effort to separate himself from the radical left in 1992 by criticizing the rap singer at a Rainbow Coalition meeting.

At that point, it seemed a plausible strategy. Bush was intent on establishing himself as a centrist. He had attacked the Republican-controlled Congress for threatening the earned-income tax credit, a stipend that goes to the working poor. His message—studded with Clintonian rhetoric—was an appeal to Republicans to remember those "on the outskirts of poverty" and "leave no one behind."

Indeed, that is still Bush's message, though it rarely penetrates the fog of battle. Even as he was presiding over an outrageously negative assault on McCain in South Carolina, Bush was routinely, in town meetings, challenging key Republican constituencies on issues like immigration and poverty. His most eloquent moments came when he defended illegal immigrants ("Family values don't stop at the border. Those mothers and fathers are coming here to feed their children") or when he proposed tax breaks for single mothers or programs to help care for the children of prisoners. He would routinely lose audiences by diving into the minutiae of education reform: "You people in South Carolina really have to think about the importance of developing a reading diagnostic tool for children in K through two. I can't tell you how important that is!"

And yet Bush has gained a reputation in this campaign as a callow coward, a frat boy unwilling to take chances. Certainly, the comparison with McCain hasn't helped; and Bush's own aspect—the smirk, the malapropisms, the witless aperçus ("When you own property, every day is Earth Day")—hasn't helped, either. But far more damaging has been the candidate's unwillingness to make strong statements of righteous outrage at the appropriate times. He refused to attack Pat Buchanan's ridiculous isolationist theories about the Second World War (McCain wanted to kick Buchanan out of the Republican Party); he refused to challenge Bob Jones University on its racism and its anti-Catholicism. And he allowed the allies of Pat Robertson, people he privately disdains, to carry his South Carolina campaign. "We have a real problem with these two guys," William Bennett, a prominent conservative who has endorsed neither Bush nor McCain, says. "McCain doesn't know how to make a friend and Bush doesn't know how to make an enemy."

"This wasn't a 'Sister Souljah,'" McCain quietly insisted, back on the airplane. "This was more basic. It was a direct challenge to Republicans about what sort of party we're going to be."

But the speech was also a sly bit of tactical politics, just as Clinton's less sweeping—and less dangerous—gesture had been. It was an effort, with primaries in moderate states like New York, Ohio, and California approaching, to permanently lash George W. Bush to the most extreme elements of conservative Christianity. McCain had called Bush "a Pat Robertson Republican," and that designation is not likely to disappear if Bush should win the nomination and go on to a general-election campaign against Al Gore. And the press had giddily jumped aboard. Within hours of the Virginia Beach address, Bush was squirming at a press conference in Bellevue, Washington, in the face of questions like "Can you name two issues you and Pat Robertson disagree on?" (He refused, saying that he wouldn't play that sort of "political game.") Indeed, Bush now seemed every bit as angry at McCain as McCain had been at him in South Carolina, although both candidates, apparently sensing that things had gone too far, managed to control their anger on Thursday evening in Los Angeles, in the final debate before Super Tuesday.

McCain's campaign has been borne on a flood of heroic military images and metaphors. The candidate himself has called it his "last mission." He has compared himself to Luke Skywalker fleeing the Death Star, and it has been possible to see this race as a lonely, heroic struggle against a political party that has lost its way. But politics in a democracy is rarely so stark a prospect; it has more to do with the diplomacy of a peace negotiation—the chivvying of tiny details to build a consensus—than it does with a military crusade. And, while McCain's Virginia Beach speech was admirable, and a necessary corrective in many ways, it also bore an eerie resemblance to a military mission of another sort—a kamikaze ride, in which the old fighter jock plowed his A-4 into the deck of George W. Bush's aircraft carrier. They are both crippled now. It will be close to impossible for John McCain to capture the heart of his party and win the nomination; it may prove equally difficult for George W. Bush to escape the cage in which McCain has placed him and win the respect of the country. ◆

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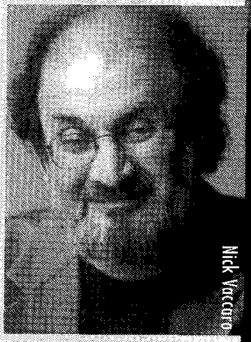

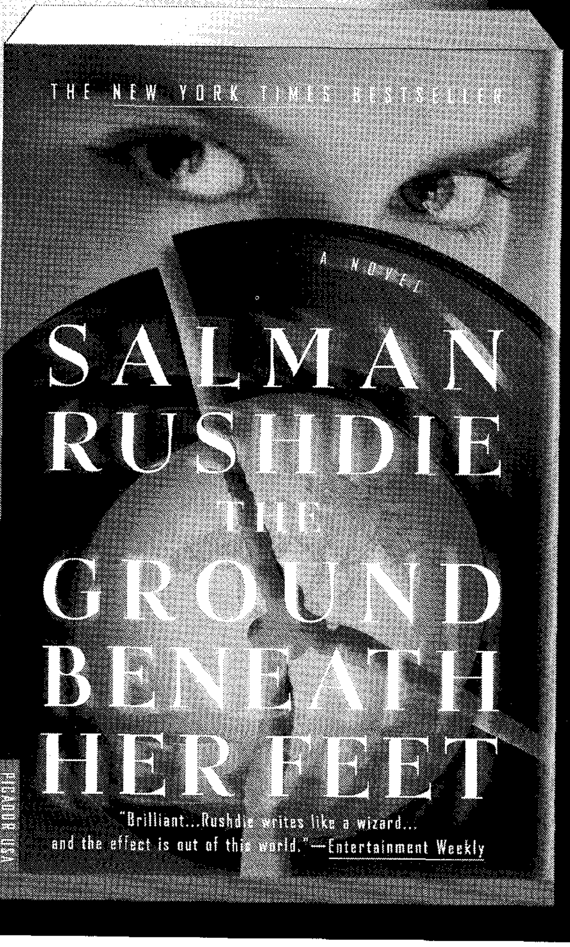
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SHOUTS & MURMURS

WHO WANTS TO KEEP HIS JOB?

BY BRUCE McCALL

To: Programming Dept. N.Y.
From: Programming Head L.A.

So, O.K., I get to play Monday-morning coroner. “Who Wants to Have Sex with Some Hell’s Angels?” failed, people, because nobody (anybody at Standards & Practices listening???) visited the set during dress rehearsal. Because leather photographs like muslin on TV. Because depravity-based TV shows shouldn’t be broadcast on Sunday A.M.

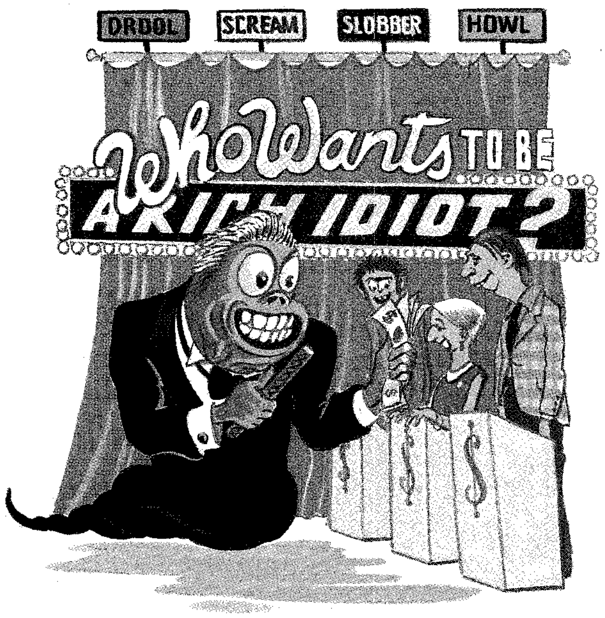
Onward. Last night I O.K.’ed a speed-up of “Who’s Up for Robbing an Armored Car?” to fill the sudden hole in the sweeps-week sked. (Don’t forget to screen contestants for gun permits, I beg!) I know, it didn’t focus-group as strong—despite the built-in freeway-chase viewership bonus—as “Who Wants to Mud-Wrestle Roseanne?,” but the latter’s production costs are so low that it will end up bankrolling the first two episodes of “Who Wants to Hijack a Cruise Ship?” I’ve brought in Hy and Doris (“America’s Bloodiest Emergency-Room Videos”). Heed their wisdoms. (Hy memos me re “Who Wants to Kidnap Bill Gates?” four simple words: “Make it Jennifer Lopez.” Twenty extra Nielsen points.)

But, people, whoa! I’m paid to be a skeptic, to think things like, Is the “who wants to” genre already in its out cycle? I’m not talking retrenchment here. The people have voted: Wholesome, family-oriented, audience-interactive pornotainment—always, *always* with high production values—is today’s No. 1 cultural snack food. We’re just the Kozmo.com delivery guys. *But the snacks can’t arrive stale.* Herewith a few mindprods:

•Has anybody bothered checking out India TV’s daytime ratings monster? F.Y.I.: Format, quiz show. Gimmick, wrong answers cost contestants their *own* money, homes, etc. Insight: U.S. has never had a prime-time personal-ruin-driven TV quizzer.

•Amateur-transplant-surgery genre is *hot.* Who says so? Six solid proposals in last week say so. Yeah, I know it’s a legal mosh pit. (Shoot offshore? Real surgeon on standby?)

•Affiliates still feel double-crossed after net showed them but then never skedded “Kangaroo Court,” our live tragedocuquiz. Let’s relook at it. (Re-



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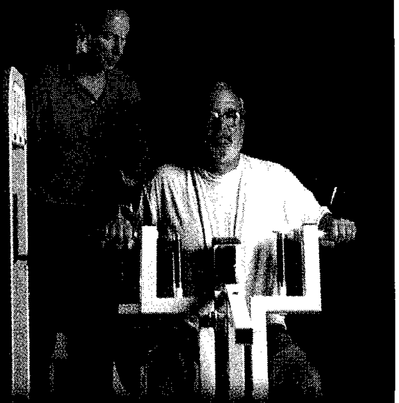

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name it "Twelve Angry Men" to nip the nature-show confusion?) Legal says tacking on a "Life isn't fair" V.O. & super upfront would cover railroading-the-innocent issue like a cheap judge's robe.

This is not to say that we should abandon the "who wants to" franchise, flat out. I mean, any competitor could snap it right up and milk it in its death throes. We need a fresh creative twist, like "Who *Doesn't* Want to . . .?" How about: "Who Doesn't Want to Have Diplomatic Immunity for a Day?" "Who Doesn't Want to Blow Up a Building?" I'm thinking this could Viagrafy the concept conceptually.

But the TV audience is treacherous. (Anybody remember "America's Most Shocking Autopsies"?) Moral: Look where not even *cable* has gazed before. Ask yourself, What's the network's liability exposure?—and work forward from there. As in "Who Wants to Bomb an Iraqi Missile Site?" That would be great TV *and* good citizenship, with zero chance of successful litigation.

A few other notions: "The 20,000-Volt Death Quiz." Gimmick: death-row inmate gets a week's reprieve for every correct answer until . . . hey, you can calculate the odds as well as me. Who, people, could *not* tune in?

But, damn it, that only reminds me, "who wants to" is one haunting refrain. "Who Wants to Drive the Indy 500?" "Who Wants to Take Home a Fifty-Foot Anaconda?" Wrong. Those are all too rural-unmarried-male-skewed. We've got to think big-target, not fragments. And yet, and yet. Maybe it was Ed Murrow who said that the joke's dead when Letterman stops telling it. Maybe "who wants to" is thresholding—has already thresholded, we just don't have instrumentation precise enough to measure it yet.

People, I have a Monday breakfast with the Chief, and I don't want "Who Wants My Job?" winning the exit poll. Here's one final large, large, *large* idea: Quiz format. Mega-bucks payoff. Contestants all brainy creeps, but gimmick is: Make lo-empathy super-creeps take a dive and grease answers so single sympathetic creep keeps on winning until even more sympathetic creep comes along. People, how come I suddenly feel a whole helluvalot better about Monday b'fast??? ♦

BRUCE McCALL

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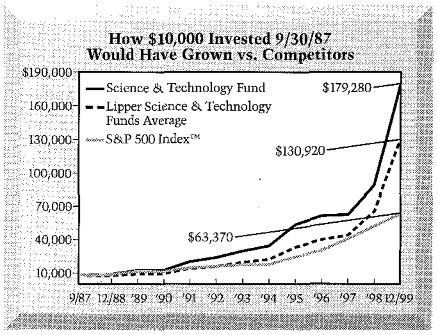

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PERSONAL HISTORY

I KNEW SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL

My mother in a dream.

BY DAGOBERTO GILB

The author's mother in Los Angeles, in the nineteen-forties.

COURTESY DAGOBERTO GILB

I was holding her hand at a train depot. I can still feel my arm in the air, limp and soft with trust. It must have been Union Station, Los Angeles, and I don't know where we were going or why. I was thrilled. I was small, probably just walking, and looking up at her I swear I knew then that she was beautiful. She was wearing a hat, one of those brimless hats women wore in the fifties that matched the rest of the outfit. There was a red rose in the hat, I'm sure. It wasn't a real rose but a lacy decorative one. Almost all my other early images of her are from the department stores we used to go to together. She's trying clothes on, everybody paying attention to her, or standing at a cosmetics counter, my mommy and the women around talking fast and unashamed, giggling, playing with the silver and gold and glass tubes, the jars and sprays, the smallest brushes, the colored powders. The train depot on that trip was the black-and-white of a dream, and the indoors had the faraway feel of the outdoors, its expanse as dusty as a memory.

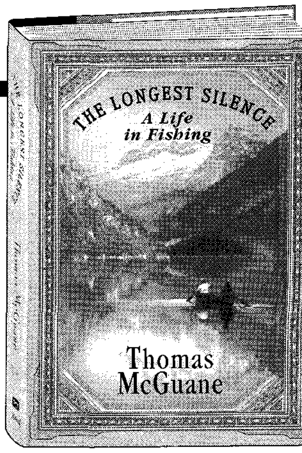
I think it was La Cienega. It was a Spanish name, and the other stores where she modelled—downtown or on Wilshire Boulevard, department stores like the Broadway and Robinson's—didn't have Spanish names. The store didn't seem large. Just elegant. Racks of women's clothes with beads and jewels, collars and sleeves, strings and straps and bows, low in the front, low in the back. I went into the dressing room, where all the models were changing from one thing into another for the show that day. I watched them, breathing the cool mist of perfume, as they hurried through the step-throughs and pull-offs of dress and undress—the zippers and snaps, the gritty static or smooth wisp of on and off. Skin that was legs and arms, and round hips that cut into small waists; bras, even a breast, and panties that showed that darkened mystery hair. The piccolo of women's voices. I was a good boy, they said. I would be such a handsome man. I remember the warmth of their touch, like that of my favorite blanket. I used to scissor my fingers onto its nylon end-seam to go to sleep, my thumb in my mouth, sucking. Even then I knew it was women, their attraction and allure, that I loved, *mi* mommy and her friends, her best friend, the woman from Puerto Rico who she could whisper to in Spanish. But it was this day I remember because on the other side of the store there was an old man in a uniform tinting a display window that faced the street. There were mannequins behind him and he let me go through a half door to sit between him and them. He brushed on the tint, the glass becoming a yellow brown, that biting, tart odor, and I looked out at the people and cars passing by on the other side of the window. I would run from him back to the dressing room, from one scent to the other, back and forth, the fumes subliminal and intoxicating as I ran from the old man with the paintbrush and can in the room no one got to sit in to the beautiful women in their underwear.

She loved to go to Hollywood Park, and we went to the last race because admission was free. I loved to go, too, and not just because of the horses, the earth shuddering under me as they left the gate and pounded across the finish line. I liked to collect the bet stubs like baseball cards, the losers thrown down, a trail of litter that began in the parking lot until it carpeted the grandstands. I collected fives and tens, win, place, or show. Win stubs were the hardest to find. Wandering the track was like walking on a beach looking for unbroken shells. We'd go down to the general-admission area, at track level, or we'd walk right over to a nicer area, where there were chairs and tables and drinks, and sometimes we were invited to sit in a private glass-enclosed clubhouse. A man would offer to buy us drinks, and I'd get a Roy Rogers—grenadine and Coke. She gave me the green olives on toothpicks from her drink to eat. The man who bought the drinks might say something at a distance first, and then approach. Usually, she just told a waiter, or the man himself, thank you so much, polite, generously happy about the drinks, but that would be it, and there we'd be, her and me at the races. I was her date. I was her man. Those men, in their suits and their blazers, snugged or loosened ties, stinking in their colognes, snapping bills off silver money clips, they were obvious, stupid, easy even for me to figure out. She might light a cigarette. She didn't smoke, though, for the taste. It was a look she wanted. I'd complain that I couldn't find betting stubs. She'd tell me to look around where we were sitting, and I'd search the tops of the starched tablecloths, the ashtrays, hunting the big losers. One time, I found four hundred-dollar tickets to win, creased the long way.

She was seeing this one man. Years later, I learned that she'd been seeing him for some time, even before she and my father divorced, which was soon after I was born. His voice was loud by design, the way a horn is loud. She used to ask me, Do you like him? He took us to baseball games. The Tigers and Angels and Yankees, the Dodgers and Giants and Pirates. The year Roger Maris hit sixty-one home runs I caught one of his B.P. homers. The loud man let me hang around after the games and get autographs. He was a big man, a fireman, and sometimes we visited him at his station. I was too scared to slide down the pole. It was too fat, too thick. I played handball alone in a white room beside the red trucks. He wasn't a bad man, but I didn't like him very much. I couldn't explain why, except that he was loud when he talked, and even though he bought me ice cream anytime I wanted it, he was no fun. And so I would answer her. No, I would say.

We were in the kitchen. I was sitting in one of those heavy metal chairs with glossy vinyl covering—we had two of them—and my mom got mad at me. I was used to this. She had a job now in a dental office, and things like this happened because she was tired when she came home. But this time he was there. They were always going out, and I was left at home alone with our knobless television and a TV dinner, sometimes two, because I was getting taller, flexing muscles I could see in my arms. He only came inside our house once in a while, and she must have told me to go away, to get out of the kitchen. In that loud voice he told me to do what she said. I sat there. Then he was louder, really yelling. I sat there. And so he grabbed me and I held onto the metal rails under the chair and he picked it up along with me. I'm not leaving! I told him. You don't tell me! He was furious, and my mom was yelling now, too, and she told him to leave me alone, and he stopped, dropping the chair and me in it. I went into the bedroom and I was crying, waiting for her to come. She hit me sometimes, and when she got there that's what I was expecting. Instead she held me and she was smiling. She was proud of me. She said, You're such a man already.

At school the kids said things. I knew it. I was bigger than they were and more athletic, and angry all the time, and it wasn't like they were going to say anything much to my face. My mom was a Mexican and my mom was divorced, and one time a girl told me her mom didn't like mine and she didn't like



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me, either. I didn't hang out with too many kids. There was this one boy—he had his own bedroom, with toys everywhere. He had a basketball, and a hoop on the garage. I would want to play, but he was soft, blubbery, and I'd shoot alone for as long as his mom would let me. She was always smoking and drinking coffee in a stained white mug and talking on the phone, and once I came over and she took me into their clean bathroom and got a washcloth and washed my neck and behind my ears, scrubbed so hard it hurt. She was supposed to be a friend of my mom's, but I knew she wasn't, not really, because whenever my mom came to collect me only my mom talked.

Sometimes my mom would take me to the Food Giant and buy me a chili dog with finely grated cheese on the top that would melt in a minute. When she went out, which was a lot, she left me some money and I'd ride a bike down to the Thrifty and buy a half-gallon square of chocolate ice cream. She didn't cook, except on my birthday, when she made *chile verde* that stewed for hours. She'd buy tamales from a bakery on Whittier Boulevard. In the morning, before she went to work and I went to school, we had breakfast at a coffee shop, and she'd give me her hash-brown potatoes. Even then, at that hour, men looked at her. Even then, men would come up to our table, squat so that they could talk to her. Introduce themselves. I was starting junior high, I had touched a girl, looked at nudie magazines, and I knew what these men wanted. I was such a good-looking boy, they would tell her. When they guessed at my age, they missed by years, and then the talk would be about her beauty—how could such a young woman have a son so old? She was too polite to them, and one time I remember this man's eyes looking at my mom. I wanted us to be alone. I didn't want her to be polite. I was so mad at her. I was so mad then that I think I never got over it.

She'd stopped modelling, but when she and her Puerto Rican friend got together they talked about the other models' getting fat butts and saggy *chiches*, girdles and falsies. Her Puerto Rican friend was marrying a man who owned the biggest sailboat ever and they were going around the world in it. He was so rich he didn't have to work. My mom had to work. It made her tired. She was going out on more dates, too, so she was always busy. She talked wistfully about Pancho Gonzalez, the tennis star. Another friend of hers was supposed to be his cousin. She was a woman who talked too fast and too much, and she drank, and she laughed wrong. She and my mom both bleached their hair platinum, but this friend's was ugly and cheap-looking. She was a *fea*, short and plump and pimply, but she thought she was as pretty as my mom. She was bad news, I knew, because by then I was smarter than my mom seemed to be. This "cousin" did not help my mom win Pancho Gonzalez, but they got drunk a lot together. My mom's Puerto Rican friend stopped coming around. Maybe she was sailing on the Pacific Ocean, maybe not yet, but she was married, and she was rich, and we weren't.

Though the modelling jobs weren't around anymore, the pretty clothes were. Bills came in the mail daily. I answered the phone and a bill collector would ask for her and I'd say she wasn't home even if she was. She was working for a dentist who was a Mormon, and she was dating him, too, and two old biddies started coming to our door lecturing my mom, and I listened to them with her. I answered their questions because she didn't know the answers. She wanted to become a Mormon, she didn't care how. We went to the dentist's house for Thanksgiving, my first Thanksgiving dinner. His mother had a bun of white and gray hair and a frilly apron just like one of those grandmothers on a TV show. We had to sit at a long dinner table, crowded with people. It was a feast of full bowls and

platters, and I ate so much turkey and mashed potatoes that I got sick, but I didn't think it was because I overate. It was because they didn't like my mom. Well, I didn't like these people from the start. My mom and I spoke to each other, and they looked at us as if we were being secretive, as if we were talking in Spanish, not in English. After dinner we were taking a walk around the neighborhood with the dentist—it was green with overgrown trees and grass, and there weren't always sidewalks, and the idea was that he should get to know me a little—when my mom said that something was wrong, she was bleeding. She assured me it wasn't that kind of bleeding, teased me for not understanding immediately, but he didn't laugh. He didn't like this, didn't want to have to find an open store, couldn't believe she wouldn't be prepared. She sloughed that off, wanting to be cheerful. She wanted to make him happy. But he didn't laugh. This was the man I'd been lying about to new junior-high friends. Before I met him, my mom had told me that she was going to marry him. My dad, I'd tell these guys, snooty, was a dentist. I wanted us to be richer than them. After that day I don't remember ever hearing her talk about him again, and I never asked.

Two or three times my mom took me to an old lady's house. It was an old house, with old things, and I had to have good manners and eat boring food. The woman thought I was a bright boy and liked it when I visited, my mom told me, and I might be getting an inheritance from her. When the old lady died, I went to the funeral parlor with my mom to pay last respects. There were no other people there, and still I felt as though we were being watched like thieves. The casket was open, but I didn't look close. It was like a church, with wooden pews and crosses and Jesuses, though no Virgins. My mom's knees went onto the padded kneel board, and as they did she made a loud *pedo*. I don't think I'd ever heard that from her before. She looked at me and I looked at her and we both tried to hold back from laughing. The more we did, the worse it hurt, and the stronger was the desire to laugh. She kept kneeling there, her hands folded and her

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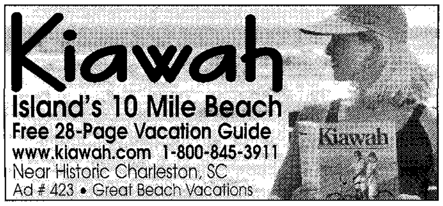

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TO MY FIFTIES

I should say something to you
Now that you have departed over the mountains
Leaving me to my sixties and seventies, not hopeful of your return,
O you, who seemed to mark the end of life, who ever would have thought that you would burn
With such sexual fires as you did? I wound up in you
Some work I had started long before. You were
A time for completion and for destruction. My
Marriage had ended. In you I sensed trying to find
A way out of you actually that wasn't toward nonexistence.
I thought, "All over." You cried, "I'm here!" You were like travelling
In this sense, but on one's own
With no tour guide or even the train schedule.
As a "Prime of Life" I missed you. You seemed an incompletion made up of completions
Unacquainted with each other. How could this be happening? I thought. Or
What should it mean, exactly, that I am fifty-seven? I wanted to be always feeling desire.
Now you're a young age to me. And in you, as at every other time
I thought that one year would last forever.
"I did the best possible. I lasted my full ten years. Now I'm responsible
For someone else's decade and haven't time to talk to you, which is a shame
Since I can never come back." My Fifties! Answer me one question!
Were you the culmination or a phase? "Neither and both." Explain!
"No time. Farewell!"

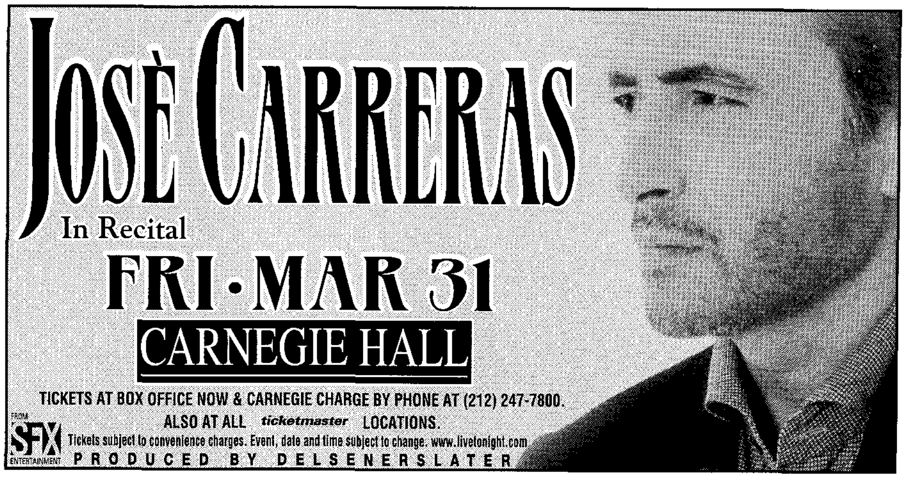
—*Kenneth Koch*

head down as though she were praying, but really she was giggling and then we both started laughing too hard. There was no inheritance for either of us.

One night I was watching TV when a man who my mom worked for, someone I think she'd also gone out with, came to the door screaming about her. She was out on a date. He was wailing about money, what had she done with his money. He was drunk and howling and cussing. I knew about drunk because sometimes there were bottles in the house, broken glasses, laughter. I knew who this man was because he'd shot someone. Mom had told me about him, and I'd heard her tell her friends. He kept beating on the door, and it finally blew open right in front of me just as a cop neighbor I'd called came running up. A week later she married a man raised near Lancaster. I'd never heard of him, I'd never met him before. He was the cousin of a woman she'd worked with. He had the stupidest grin, as stupid as his hick name. He asked me if there was one thing he could do for me. I said I wanted him to take me to see Washington, D.C., and he grinned that dumb grin and said he would. I actually believed him. He and my mom went to Arizona for a week for their honeymoon, and after that we moved in. He wore a different clean green uniform every day for his job, and most of the rest of the time, too. There were deer heads and birds and fish on the walls. Maple furniture, a family table with matching chairs. He had a son who was a taxidermist, and he was proud of him. My mom's new husband was an electrician and a couple of times I worked for him and that's when I heard him tell his working friends he just felt so lucky to be married to such a pretty Mexican gal. A few weeks later she went on the TV show "Let's Make a Deal" and she was chosen. When Monty Hall asked her name, she told him her new name without a flinch. But she didn't win anything big—twenty or forty bucks, that was all—and she didn't get to pick a door.

Not too long afterward, she asked me to go to lunch with her. We hadn't gone out together, the two of us, for some time because she was so busy with her new husband. They were beginning to have arguments about bills and money, and they raced to get the mail first. The lunch wasn't only with my mom. It was with the loud man, the fireman, she'd dated before. He took us to a restaurant. I don't remember the food, only that when he pulled into the driveway of the apartment building where we lived, she jumped out of the car and rushed to the front door, and I was stuck in the back seat and this old boyfriend leaned over to talk to me. He told me he loved my mom and he was sorry and he wished something or other, I don't know. It was a speech, and it seemed as if he might cry or already was crying, but I told him I had to go. Maybe this was why I didn't like him. Big as he was, he was too loud, and yet he would cry. I think the car was a Thunderbird coupe, and I didn't even enjoy that. Things weren't good between my mom and her husband, and I knew she wasn't happy—I figured that she'd been sneaking out for these lunches with the fireman for a while—but I started avoiding my mom and her husband as much as possible. I never liked the deer meat or the maple furniture or the Hank Snow music, and I ate with my new neighborhood friends, stayed as late as I could. Then my mom and her husband separated, and we moved to an apartment complex on the south side of town. She would just lie on the couch, half awake, half asleep, depressed. We didn't talk too much. I had a job, and even though I was getting in fights at school and she was getting calls from the vice-principal about suspensions and swats and the rest, she didn't really care, and I didn't think it was such a big deal, either.

She married the loud fireman, who was almost ten years younger than she was—though nobody ever thought so—and who loved her after all this time. He bought her a brand-new house and everything that went in it, and it



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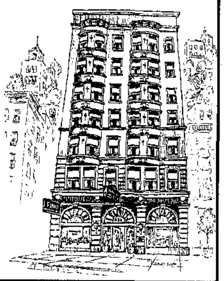

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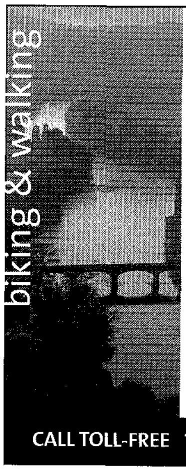

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was as if we were rich, though I didn't feel as though anything was mine. It was all theirs. His and hers. He wasn't there very much. He worked hard at two jobs—he drove a Brink's truck, too—and she had all the money she'd ever dreamed of because he gave her his paychecks as if she were a financial wizard. When we were alone, or when she was joking in front of the women who would visit, she would say that he could be boring and dull, and that if he wasn't gone most of the time, if she didn't keep him working two jobs . . . Then she'd laugh, and everyone laughed with her. She always had food, and always a drink. There were jugs of wine and there was beer and liquor. There was a new blender, the best. He loved to drink with her, too. He loved everything she did, everything she bought, and she bought everything. She was the best thing that he could ever imagine happening to him, his life was full of sunlight and colors he'd never seen. I wasn't around much, going back to my old friends in my old high school, going to a new job to have my own money, partying myself now, playing with drugs and liquor and girlfriends, but I was happy that she wasn't worried anymore. Since she didn't have to do anything but please him, she pleased him. He didn't like "spicy" food, so she learned to cook potatoes and roasts. She babied him when he got home, made him feel like he ran the world. They drank together. They talked to each other and had fun when they drank. When she was around him, she became like him. When he thought he should be serious, he droned philosophically about black people and illegal aliens. My mom was an illegal alien, born out of wedlock in Mexico City and baptized at the Basílica Santa María de Guadalupe. She often tried to stop him when he went off on a long editorial, but it wasn't always worth it to her.

My mother was becoming a person I wouldn't want to know, and sometimes, especially when I was reminding her of a past that she didn't want to remember, she'd get mad. Once I told a neighbor that her husband wasn't my real father. I didn't know that I wasn't supposed to say this. I was sorry I embarrassed her. I

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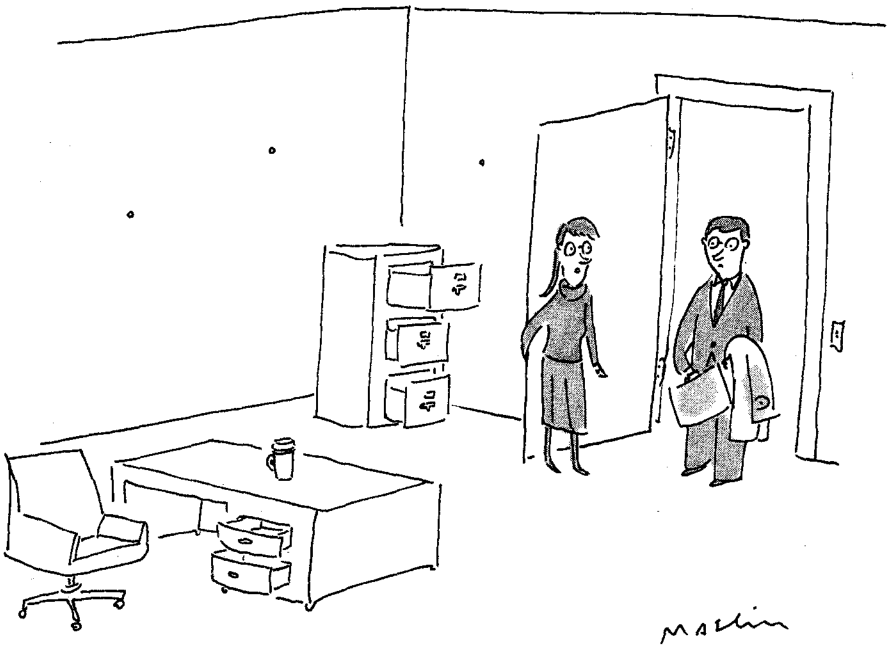
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT
Saul Bellow

didn't even care about my real father much, I only saw him a couple of days a year, but the only times my mother's husbands were fathers were when others made that assumption. They were just men to me, part of her life, not mine. Another time, after a year of living in this new house, with this new husband, I made her so angry by something I'd said or done, she told me she didn't know where I'd come from. She meant it, too, looking at me like I was an utter stranger, a lousy tenant.

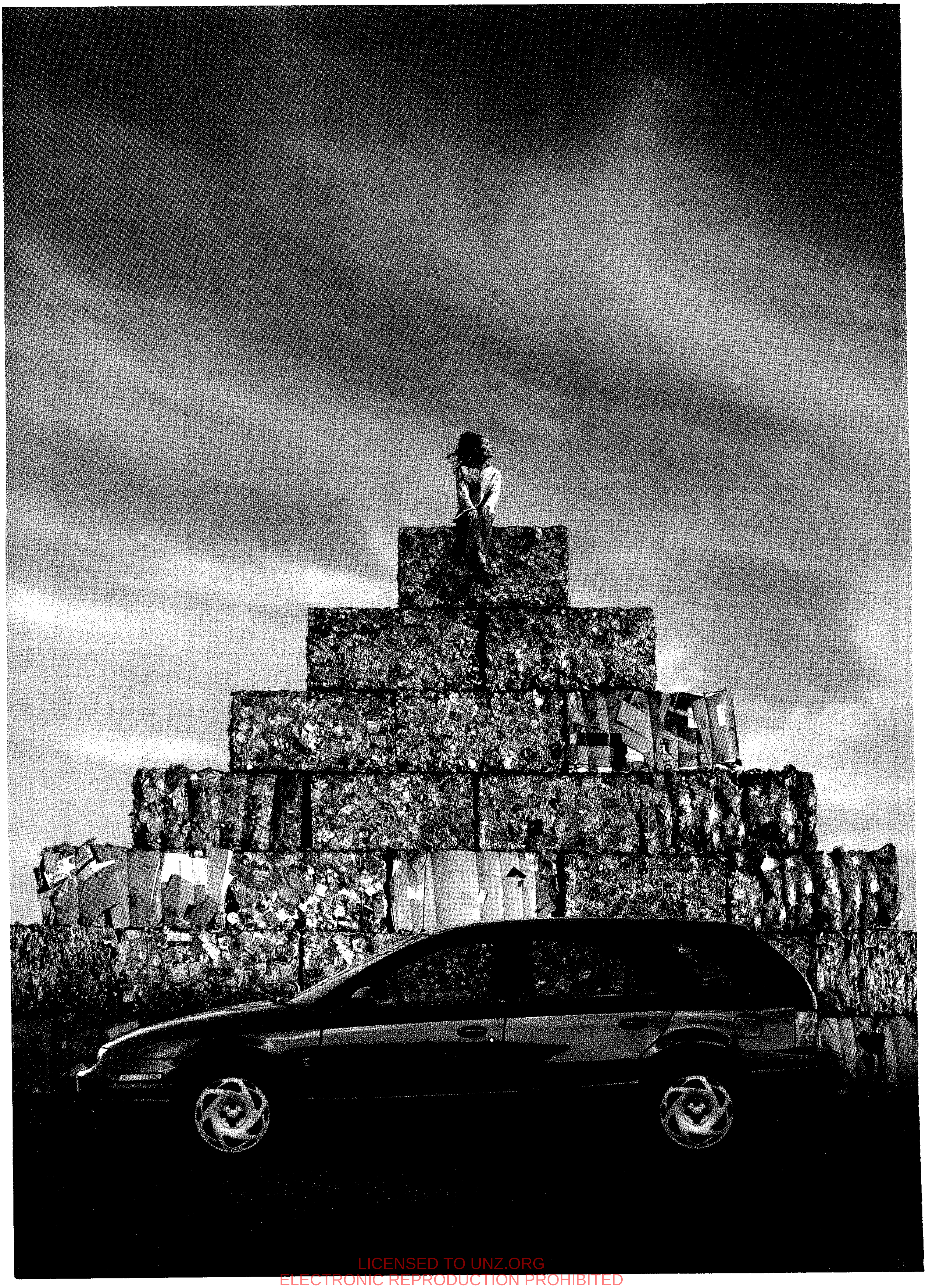
On a Tuesday morning, just before dawn, I jerked myself out of a dream. It was so vivid I turned on a light and wrote it down. In the dream, a voice was talking to me, asking me if I wanted to talk to my mother. Why wouldn't I? Because we never did anymore, hadn't really talked in decades. When we did, there was nothing but awkwardness and mutual disapproval between us, and for several years there was nothing at all. I'd moved far away, to El Paso. The voice in the dream was asking me questions from my mother, and I started responding to the dream, to the voice, and straight to my mom. I answered the voice, yes, I always loved her. She had to know that I didn't care about whatever it was that had come between us, that I would remember only how much I loved her. I was always proud of her. I thought she was the best mommy, the most beautiful woman. I said I understood everything she'd gone through. Of course I didn't think only about the past, our troubles. Of course I forgave her, and I told her I wanted her to forgive me, too. And then I was overcome by a sob that wasn't in my dream but in my body and my mouth and my eyes.

Two days later, her husband called me. He was calm and positive. My mom, he said, had been taken to the hospital Tuesday. She was found unconscious. There was a problem with her liver. She was in intensive care, but he was convinced she'd be home soon. He just thought I should know. I thought this sounded much more serious, and I called the hospital. A nurse there said I was right, usually it was only a matter of time, it could be at any moment, though it could also take days or even a few weeks. I asked about the liver, whether it was the usual reason a liver goes. She asked, Well, was she always the life of the party? I got a plane ticket. I remembered a previous visit, and finding an empty vodka bottle—plastic, the cheapest brand you could buy—in the corner of the bedroom where I was sleeping, and where she kept a mountain of purses and shoes and wallets. I found another, most of it gone, behind a closet door.

I rented a car at the airport and went to the hospital. She was bloated, her hair a tousle—a woman who never missed a hairdresser's appointment—an unappealing white gown tied around her. Tubes needled into her hand and arm, a clear mask was over her mouth and nose. When she heard me, her eyes opened. She had no voice. I talked. Years had passed, she knew little about my life. She knew that I did construction work, thought it was all I did, ever, didn't know anything about the other life I led, the one as a writer. I never told her. I was afraid that she would only be his wife, not my mom, and she wouldn't care in the appropriate way. Or that she would be too relieved, and that all those other years I'd been struggling, when she disapproved of me, even thought I deserved whatever misery befell me, would be forgotten. I didn't want to give that up so easily. These were the reasons I had told her nothing. But I knew my mom would be proud. I knew she would be happy for me. I told her that I was a writer, and that I'd had a book published, another one just out. I had been going to New York City and Washington, D.C. I'd gone there more than once, and I never paid. Her eyes smiled so big. I knew she would like this the most. She always wanted to travel the world. Can you believe they even give me money? I asked her. She was proud of me, and she was as surprised as I was about it. And then I told her why I had to come. I told her about the dream I'd had two nights before, on the first night she spent in the hospital. My mom's eyes stopped moving. I said, I talked to you, you were talking to me, we were talking. She nodded—her whole weakened body squirmed while she was nodding. I knew it, and yet I wouldn't believe this story if I'd heard it. It was such a *telenovela* deathbed scene, mother and son, both weeping about a psychic conversation routed hundreds of miles through the smog and traffic and over the mountains and across three deserts, from one dream to another, so that we wouldn't miss telling each other for the last time before she died. She was as stunned as I was, as happy. You know? She kept nodding, looking at me, crying. Oh, Mom, I said. ♦



"Sorry, Mr. Winsler was just let go. You may finish his latte if you'd like."



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What the co-inventor of the Pill didn't know: menstruation can endanger women's health.

BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

John Rock was christened in 1890 at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Marlborough, Massachusetts, and married by Cardinal William O'Connell, of Boston. He had five children and nineteen grandchildren. A crucifix hung above his desk, and nearly every day of his adult life he attended the 7 A.M. Mass at St. Mary's in Brookline. Rock, his friends would say, was in love with his church. He was also one of the inventors of the birth-control pill, and it was his conviction that his faith and his vocation were perfectly compatible. To anyone who disagreed he would simply repeat the words spoken to him as a child by his home-town priest: "John, always stick to your conscience. Never let anyone else keep it for you. And I mean anyone else." Even when Monsignor Francis W. Carney, of Cleveland, called him a "moral rapist," and when Frederick Good, the longtime head of obstetrics at Boston City Hospital, went to Boston's Cardinal Richard Cushing to have Rock excommunicated, Rock was unmoved. "You should be afraid to meet your Maker," one angry woman wrote to him, soon after the Pill was approved. "My dear madam," Rock wrote back, "in my faith, we are taught that the Lord is with us always. When my time comes, there will be no need for introductions."

In the years immediately after the Pill was approved by the F.D.A., in 1960, Rock was everywhere. He appeared in interviews and documentaries on CBS and NBC, in *Time, Newsweek, Life, The Saturday Evening Post.* He toured the country tirelessly. He wrote a widely discussed book, "The Time Has Come: A Catholic Doctor's Proposals to End the Battle Over Birth Control," which was translated into French, German, and Dutch. Rock was six feet three and rail-thin, with impeccable manners; he held doors open for his patients and addressed them as "Mrs." or "Miss." His mere association with the Pill helped make it seem respectable. "He was a man of great dignity," Dr. Sheldon J. Segal, of the Population Council, recalls. "Even if the occasion called for an open collar, you'd never find him without an ascot. He had the shock of white hair to go along with that. And posture, straight as an arrow, even to his last year." At Harvard Medical School, he was a giant, teaching obstetrics for more than three decades. He was a pioneer in in-vitro fertilization and the freezing of sperm cells, and was the first to extract an intact fertilized egg. The Pill was his crowning achievement. His two collaborators, Gregory Pincus and Min-Cheuh Chang, worked out the mechanism. He shepherded the drug through its clinical trials. "It was his name and his reputation that gave ultimate validity to the claims that the pill would protect women against unwanted pregnancy," Loretta McLaughlin writes in her marvellous 1982 biography of Rock. Not long before the Pill's approval, Rock travelled to Washington to testify before the F.D.A. about the drug's safety. The agency examiner, Pasquale DeFelice, was a Catholic obstetrician from Georgetown University, and at one point, the story goes, DeFelice suggested the unthinkable—that the Catholic Church would never approve of the birth-control pill. "I can still see Rock standing there, his face composed, his eyes riveted on DeFelice," a colleague recalled years later, "and then, in a voice that would congeal your soul, he said, 'Young man, don't you sell *my* church short.' "

In the end, of course, John Rock's church disappointed him. In 1968, in the encyclical "Humanae Vitae," Pope Paul VI outlawed oral contraceptives and all other "artificial" methods of birth control. The passion and urgency that animated the birth-control debates of the sixties are now a memory. John Rock still matters, though, for the simple reason that in the course of reconciling his church and his work he made an error. It was not a deliberate error. It became manifest only after his death, and through scientific advances he could not have anticipated. But because that mistake shaped the way he thought about the Pill—about what it was, and how it worked, and most of all what it meant—and because John Rock was one of those responsible for the way the Pill came into the world, his error has colored the way people have thought about contraception ever since.

John Rock believed that the Pill was a "natural" method of birth control. By that he didn't mean that it *felt* natural, because it obviously didn't for many women, particularly not in its earliest days, when the doses of hormone were many times as high as they are today. He meant that it worked by natural means. Women can get pregnant only during a certain interval each month, because after ovulation their bodies produce a surge of the hormone progesterone. Progesterone—one of a class of hormones known as progestin—prepares the uterus for implantation and stops the ovaries from releasing new eggs; it favors gestation. "It is progesterone, in the healthy woman, that prevents ovulation and establishes the pre- and post-menstrual 'safe' period," Rock wrote. When a woman is pregnant, her body produces a stream of progestin in part for the same reason, so that another egg can't be released and threaten the pregnancy already under way. Progestin, in other words, is nature's contraceptive. And what was the Pill? Progestin in tablet form. When a woman was on the

The Pill's designers assumed that monthly menses were part of the natural order, and took pains that they would be preserved.

MARK BORTHWICK

Pill, of course, these hormones weren't coming in a sudden surge after ovulation and weren't limited to certain times in her cycle. They were being given in a steady dose, so that ovulation was permanently shut down. They were also being given with an additional dose of estrogen, which holds the endometrium together and—as we've come to learn—helps maintain other tissues as well. But to Rock, the timing and combination of hormones wasn't the issue. The key fact was that the Pill's ingredients duplicated what could be found in the body naturally. And in that naturalness he saw enormous theological significance.

In 1951, for example, Pope Pius XII had sanctioned the rhythm method for Catholics because he deemed it a "natural" method of regulating procreation: it didn't kill the sperm, like a spermicide, or frustrate the normal process of procreation, like a diaphragm, or mutilate the organs, like sterilization. Rock knew all about the rhythm method. In the nineteen-thirties, at the Free Hospital for Women, in Brookline, he had started the country's first rhythm clinic for educating Catholic couples in natural contraception. But how did the rhythm method work? It worked by limiting sex to the safe period that progestin created. And how did the Pill work? It worked by using progestin to extend the safe period to the entire month. It didn't mutilate the reproductive organs, or damage any natural process. "Indeed," Rock wrote, oral contraceptives "may be characterized as a 'pill-established safe period,' and would seem to carry the same moral implications" as the rhythm method. The Pill was, to Rock, no more than "an adjunct to nature."

In 1958, Pope Pius XII approved the Pill for Catholics, so long as its contraceptive effects were "indirect"—that is, so long as it was intended only as a remedy for conditions like painful menses or "a disease of the uterus." That ruling emboldened Rock still further. Short-term use of the Pill, he knew, could regulate the cycle of women whose periods had previously been unpredictable. Since a regular menstrual cycle was necessary for the successful use of the rhythm method—and since the rhythm method was sanctioned by the Church—shouldn't it be permissible for women with an irregular menstrual cycle to use the Pill in order to facilitate the use of rhythm? And if that was true why not take the logic one step further? As the federal judge John T. Noonan writes in "Contraception," his history of the Catholic position on birth control:

> If it was lawful to suppress ovulation to achieve a regularity necessary for successfully sterile intercourse, why was it not lawful to suppress ovulation without appeal to rhythm? If pregnancy could be prevented by pill plus rhythm, why not by pill alone? In each case suppression of ovulation was used as a means. How was a moral difference made by the addition of rhythm?

These arguments, as arcane as they may seem, were central to the development of oral contraception. It was John Rock and Gregory Pincus who decided that the Pill ought to be taken over a four-week cycle—a woman would spend three weeks on the Pill and the fourth week off the drug (or on a placebo), to allow for menstruation. There was and is no medical reason for this. A typical woman of childbearing age has a menstrual cycle of around twenty-eight days, determined by the cascades of hormones released by her ovaries. As first estrogen and then a combination of estrogen and progestin flood the uterus, its lining becomes thick and swollen, preparing for the implantation of a fertilized egg. If the egg is not fertilized, hormone levels plunge and cause the lining—the endometrium—to be sloughed off in a menstrual bleed. When a woman is on the Pill, however, no egg is released, because the Pill suppresses ovulation. The fluxes of estrogen and progestin that cause the lining of the uterus to grow are dramatically reduced, because the Pill slows down the ovaries. Pincus and Rock knew that the effect of the Pill's hormones on the endometrium was so modest that women could con-

ceivably go for months without having to menstruate. "In view of the ability of this compound to prevent menstrual bleeding as long as it is taken," Pincus acknowledged in 1958, "a cycle of any desired length could presumably be produced." But he and Rock decided to cut the hormones off after three weeks and trigger a menstrual period because they believed that women would find the continuation of their monthly bleeding reassuring. More to the point, if Rock wanted to demonstrate that the Pill was no more than a natural variant of the rhythm method, he couldn't very well do away with the monthly menses. Rhythm required "regularity," and so the Pill had to produce regularity as well.

It has often been said of the Pill that no other drug has ever been so instantly recognizable by its packaging: that small, round plastic dial pack. But what was the dial pack if not the physical embodiment of the twenty-eight-day cycle? It was, in the words of its inventor, meant to fit into a case "indistinguishable" from a woman's cosmetics compact, so that it might be carried "without giving a visual clue as to matters which are of no concern to others." Today, the Pill is still often sold in dial packs and taken in twenty-eight-day cycles. It remains, in other words, a drug shaped by the dictates of the Catholic Church—by John Rock's desire to make this new method of birth control seem as natural as possible. This was John Rock's error. He was consumed by the idea of the natural. But what he thought was natural wasn't so natural after all, and the Pill he ushered into the world turned out to be something other than what he thought it was. In John Rock's mind the dictates of religion and the principles of science got mixed up, and only now are we beginning to untangle them.

"So we finally reach the summit of Everest, and who's already there but that pushy sportswear buyer from Bloomingdale's, Tanya Urquhart."

In 1986, a young scientist named Beverly Strassmann travelled to Africa to live with the Dogon tribe of Mali. Her research site was the village of Sangui in the Sahel, about a hundred and twenty miles south of Timbuktu. The Sahel is thorn savannah, green in the rainy season and semi-arid the rest of the year. The Dogon grow millet, sorghum, and onions, raise livestock, and live in adobe houses on the Bandiagara escarpment. They use no contraception. Many of them have held on to their ancestral customs and religious beliefs. Dogon farmers, in many respects, live much as people of that region have lived since antiquity. Strassmann wanted to construct a precise reproductive profile of the women in the tribe, in order to understand what female biology might have been like in the millennia that preceded the modern age. In a way, Strassmann was trying to answer the same question about female biology that John Rock and the Catholic Church had struggled with in the early sixties: What is natural? Only, her sense of "natural" was not theological but evolutionary. In the era during which natural selection established the basic patterns of human biology—the natural history of our species—how often did women have children? How often did they menstruate? When did they reach puberty and menopause? What impact did breast-feeding have on ovulation? These questions had been studied before, but never so thoroughly that anthropologists felt they knew the answers with any certainty.

Strassmann, who teaches at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, is a slender, soft-spoken woman with red hair, and she recalls her time in Mali with a certain wry humor. The house she stayed in while in Sangui had been used as a shelter for sheep before she came and was turned into a pigsty after she left. A small brown snake lived in her latrine, and would curl up in a camouflaged coil on the seat she sat on while bathing. The villagers, she says, were of two minds: was it a deadly snake—*Kere me jongolo*, literally, "My bite cannot be healed"—or a harmless mouse snake? (It turned out to be the latter.) Once, one of her neighbors and best friends in the tribe roasted her a rat as a special treat. "I told him that white people aren't allowed to eat rat because rat is our totem," Strassmann says. "I can still see it. Bloated and charred. Stretched by its paws. Whiskers singed. To say nothing of the tail." Strassmann meant to live in Sangui for eighteen months, but her experiences there were so profound and exhilarating that she stayed for two and a half years. "I felt incredibly privileged," she says. "I just couldn't tear myself away."

Part of Strassmann's work focussed on the Dogon's practice of segregating menstruating women in special huts on the fringes of the village. In Sangui, there were two menstrual huts—dark, cramped, one-room adobe structures, with boards for beds. Each accommodated three women, and when the rooms were full, latecomers were forced to stay outside on the rocks. "It's not a place where people kick back and enjoy themselves," Strassmann says. "It's simply a nighttime hangout. They get there at dusk, and get up early in the morning and draw their water." Strassmann took urine samples from the women using the hut, to confirm that they were menstruating. Then she made a list of all the women in the village, and for her entire time in Mali—seven hundred and thirty-six consecutive nights—she kept track of everyone who visited the hut. Among the Dogon, she found, a woman, on average, has her first period at the age of sixteen and gives birth eight or nine times. From menarche, the onset of menstruation, to the age of twenty, she averages seven periods a year. Over the next decade and a half, from the age of twenty to the age of thirty-four, she spends so much time either pregnant or breast-feeding (which, among the Dogon, suppresses ovulation for an average of twenty months) that she averages only slightly more than one period per year. Then, from the age of thirty-five until menopause, at around fifty, as her fertility rapidly declines, she averages four menses a year. All told, Dogon women menstruate about a hundred times in their lives. (Those who survive early childhood typically live into their seventh or eighth decade.) By contrast, the average for contemporary Western women is somewhere between three hundred and fifty and four hundred times.

Strassmann's office is in the basement of a converted stable next to the Natural History Museum on the University of Michigan campus. Behind her desk is a row of battered filing cabinets, and as she was talking she turned and pulled out a series of yellowed charts. Each page listed, on the left, the first names and identification numbers of the Sangui women. Across the top was a time line, broken into thirty-day blocks. Every menses of every woman was marked with an X. In the village, Strassmann explained, there were two women who were sterile, and, because they couldn't get pregnant, they were regulars at the menstrual hut. She flipped through the pages until she found them. "Look, she had twenty-nine menses over two years, and the other had twenty-three." Next to each of their names was a solid line of X's. "Here's a woman approaching menopause," Strassmann went on, running her finger down the page. "She's cycling but is a little bit erratic. Here's another woman of prime childbearing age. Two periods. Then pregnant. I never saw her again at the menstrual hut. This woman here didn't go to the menstrual hut for twenty months after giving birth, because she was breast-feeding. Two periods. Got pregnant. Then she miscarried, had a few periods, then got pregnant again. This woman had three menses in the study period." There weren't a lot of X's on Strassmann's sheets. Most of the boxes were blank. She flipped back through her sheets to the two anomalous women who were menstruating every month. "If this were a menstrual chart of undergraduates here at the University of Michigan, all the rows would be like this."

POETRY AND SLEEP

And up I rose refresh'd, and glad, and gay,
Resolving to begin that very day
These lines; and howsoever they be done,
I leave them as a father does his son.
—Keats

What did Keats know about sleep or poetry?
He'd never seen an elephant
take a nap. Merely lying down
took the elaborate effort of a poet:

you almost saw the thought occur
behind the *massif* of forehead and then
set out to reach the extremities by dark.
Down on his back knees, the animal lowered,

a devout who baptized himself
with a trunkful of dust and straw.

Strassmann does not claim that her statistics apply to every preindustrial society. But she believes—and other anthropological work backs her up—that the number of lifetime menses isn't greatly affected by differences in diet or climate or method of subsistence (foraging versus agriculture, say). The more significant factors, Strassmann says, are things like the prevalence of wet-nursing or sterility. But over all she believes that the basic pattern of late menarche, many pregnancies, and long menstrual-free stretches caused by intensive breast-feeding was virtually universal up until the "demographic transition" of a hundred years ago from high to low fertility. In other words, what we think of as normal—frequent menses—is in evolutionary terms abnormal. "It's a pity that gynecologists think that women have to menstruate every month," Strassmann went on. "They just don't understand the real biology of menstruation."

To Strassmann and others in the field of evolutionary medicine, this shift from a hundred to four hundred lifetime menses is enormously significant. It means that women's bodies are being subjected to changes and stresses that they were not necessarily designed by evolution to handle. In a brilliant and provocative book, "Is Menstruation Obsolete?," Drs. Elsimar Coutinho and Sheldon S. Segal, two of the world's most prominent contraceptive researchers, argue that this recent move to what they call "incessant ovulation" has become a serious problem for women's

He bent the front knees next,
and then the great ship of faith began to rock

until he capsized on his side,
sleep still slow to board. The small sail
of an enormous ear flapped at a fly.
The tail flicked like rope left loose on deck.

After the dust bath, before the long drink,
in the parking lot of the shopping mall,
I watched the circus elephant breathe,
the afternoon perfumed by hay and dung.

And thought of my father, in his recliner
at the angle of repose, book still open
on his chest, pages riffled by his breath,
sleep the first savannah where my mother

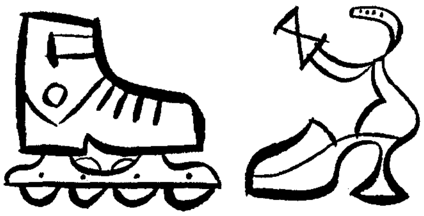
couldn't reach him, but not the last.

—*Debora Greger*

health. It doesn't mean that women are always better off the less they menstruate. There are times—particularly in the context of certain medical conditions—when women ought to be concerned if they aren't menstruating: In obese women, a failure to menstruate can signal an increased risk of uterine cancer. In female athletes, a failure to menstruate can signal an increased risk of osteoporosis. But for most women, Coutinho and Segal say, incessant ovulation serves no purpose except to increase the occurence of abdominal pain, mood shifts, migraines, endometriosis, fibroids, and anemia—the last of which, they point out, is "one of the most serious health problems in the world."

Most serious of all is the greatly increased risk of some cancers. Cancer, after all, occurs because as cells divide and reproduce they sometimes make mistakes that cripple the cells' defenses against runaway growth. That's one of the reasons that our risk of cancer generally increases as we age: our cells have more time to make mistakes. But this also means that *any* change promoting cell division has the potential to increase cancer risk, and ovulation appears to be one of those changes. Whenever a woman ovulates, an egg literally bursts through the walls of her ovaries. To heal that puncture, the cells of the ovary wall have to divide and reproduce. Every time a woman gets pregnant and bears a child, her lifetime risk of ovarian cancer drops ten per cent. Why? Possibly because, between nine months of pregnancy and the suppression of ovulation associated with breast-feeding, she stops ovulating for twelve months—and saves her ovarian walls from twelve bouts of cell division. The argument is similar for endometrial cancer. When a woman is menstruating, the estrogen that flows through her uterus stimulates the growth of the uterine lining, causing a flurry of potentially dangerous cell division. Women who do not menstruate frequently spare the endometrium that risk. Ovarian and endometrial cancer are characteristically modern diseases, consequences, in part, of a century in which women have come to menstruate four hundred times in a lifetime.

In this sense, the Pill really does have a "natural" effect. By blocking the release of new eggs, the progestin in oral contraceptives reduces the rounds of ovarian cell division. Progestin also counters the surges of estrogen in the endometrium, restraining cell division there. A woman who takes the Pill for ten years cuts her ovarian-cancer risk by around seventy per cent and her endometrial-cancer risk by around sixty per cent. But here "natural" means something different from what Rock meant. He assumed that the Pill was natural because it was an unobtrusive variant of the body's own processes. In fact, as more recent research suggests, the Pill is really only natural in so far as it's *radical*—rescuing the ovaries and endometrium from modernity. That Rock insisted on a twenty-eight-day cycle for his pill is evidence of just how deep his misunderstanding was: the real promise of the Pill was not that it could preserve the menstrual rhythms of the twentieth century but that it could disrupt them.

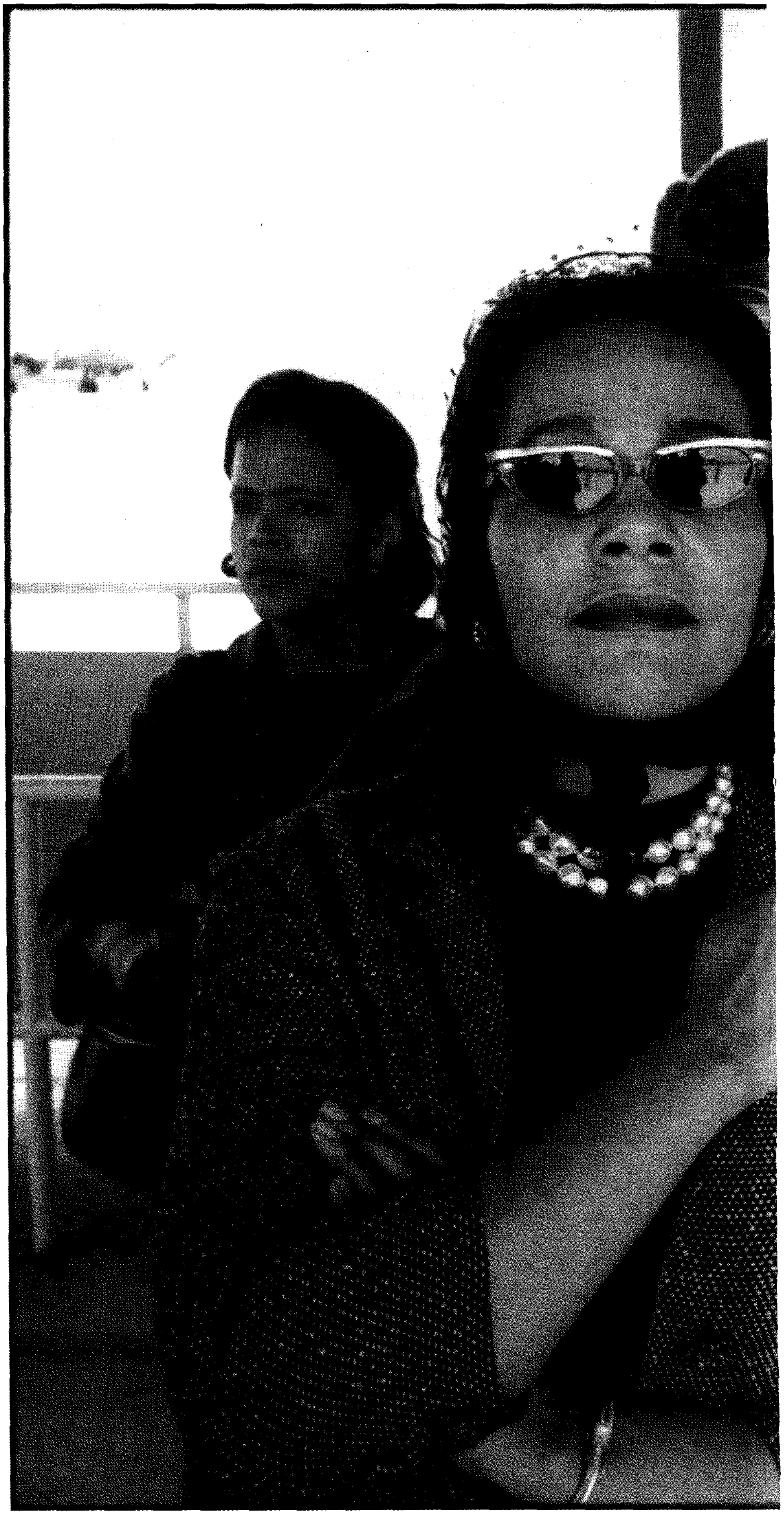


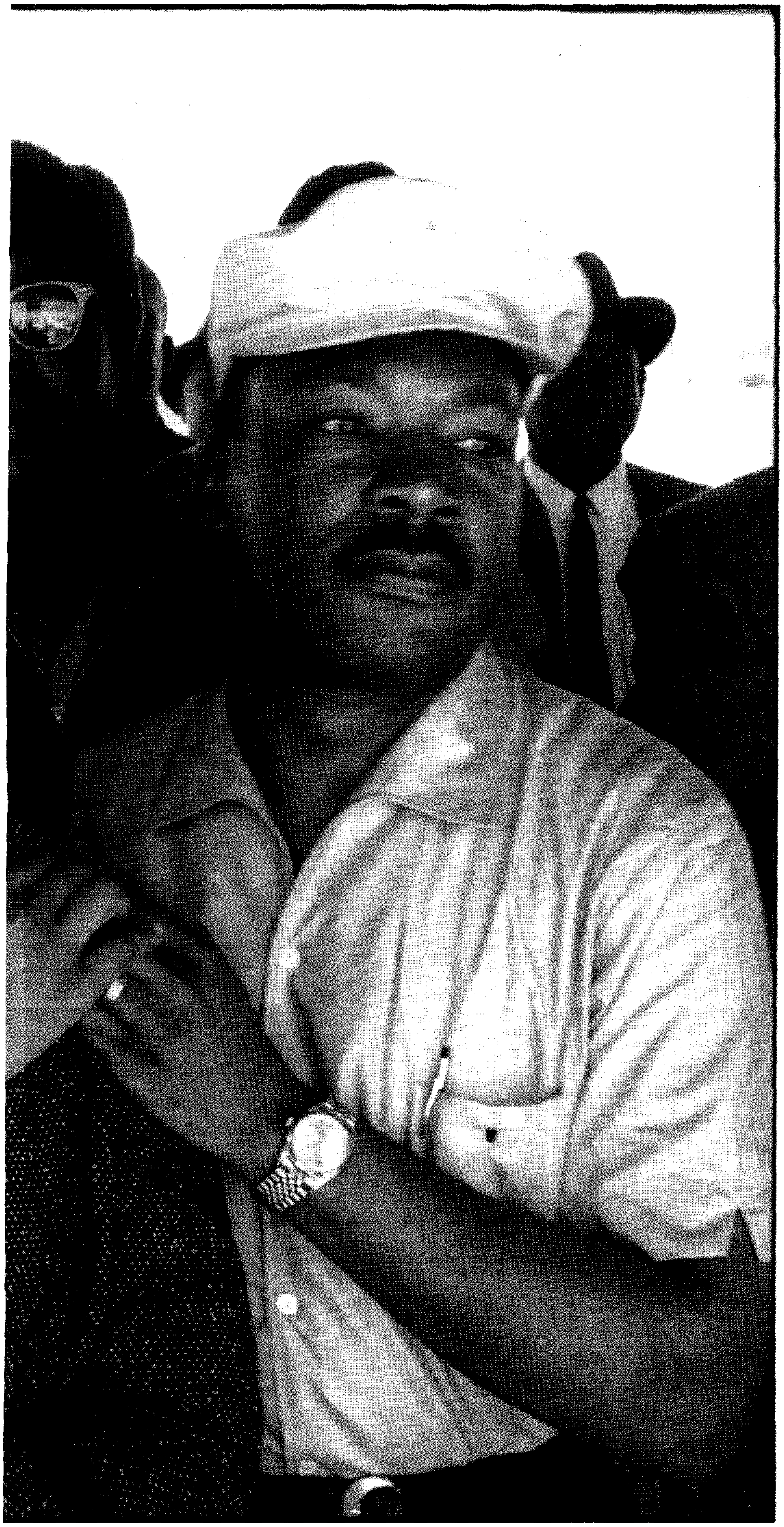
Today, a growing movement of reproductive specialists has begun to campaign loudly against the standard twenty-eight-day Pill regimen. The drug company Organon has come out with a new oral contraceptive, called Mircette, that cuts the seven-day placebo interval to two days. Patricia Sulak, a medical researcher at Texas A. & M. University, has shown that most women can probably stay on the Pill, straight through, for six to twelve weeks before they experience breakthrough bleeding or spotting. More recently, Sulak has documented precisely what the cost of the Pill's monthly "off" week is. In a paper in the February issue of the journal *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, she and her colleagues documented something that will come as no surprise to most women on the Pill: during the placebo week, the number of users experiencing pelvic pain, bloating, and swelling more than triples, breast tenderness more than doubles, and headaches increase by almost fifty per cent. In other words, some women on the Pill continue to experience the kinds of side effects associated with normal menstruation. Sulak's paper is a short, dry, academic work, of the sort intended for a narrow professional audience. But it is impossible to read it without being struck by the consequences of John Rock's desire to please his church. In the past forty years, millions of women around the world have been given the Pill in such a way as to maximize their pain and suffering. And to what end? To pretend that the Pill was no more than a pharmaceutical version of the rhythm method?

In 1980 and 1981, Malcolm Pike, a medical statistician at the University of Southern California, travelled to Japan for six months to study at the Atomic Bomb Casualties Commission. Pike wasn't interested in the effects of the bomb. He wanted to examine the medical records that the commission had been painstakingly assembling on the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was investigating a question that would ultimately do as much to complicate our understanding of the Pill as Strassmann's research would a decade later: why did Japanese women have breast-cancer rates six times lower than American women?

In the late forties, the World Health Organization began to collect and publish comparative health statistics from around the world, and the breast-cancer disparity between Japan and America had come to obsess cancer specialists. The obvious answer—that Japanese women were somehow genetically protected against breast cancer—didn't make sense, because once Japanese women moved to the United States they began to get breast cancer almost as often as American women did. As a result, many experts at the time assumed that the culprit had to be some unknown toxic chemical or virus unique to the West. Brian Henderson, a colleague of Pike's at U.S.C. and his regular collaborator, says that when he entered the field, in 1970, "the whole viral- and chemical-carcinogenesis idea was huge—it dominated the literature." As he recalls, "Breast cancer fell into this large, unknown box that said it was something to do with the environment—and that word 'environment' meant a lot of different things to a lot of different people. They might be talking about diet or smoking or pesticides."

Henderson and Pike, however, became fascinated by a number of statistical peculiarities. For one thing, the rate of increase in breast-cancer risk rises sharply throughout women's thirties and forties and then, at menopause, it starts to slow down. If a cancer is caused by some toxic outside agent, you'd expect





SHOWCASE

MARCH FROM SELMA

Thirty-five years ago this week, after months of unsuccessful efforts to register black voters in Alabama, a group of protesters set out on what would be the first of three attempts to march from Selma to Montgomery. As the protesters crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, just outside of Selma, they were turned back by state troopers, who beat them with clubs and doused them with tear gas.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was not there on "Bloody Sunday," but a couple of days later he led two thousand protesters back along the same route. Most of the marchers assumed that they were going to proceed on to Montgomery, but King, in a move that would anger many, had agreed to obey a court order, and he turned the marchers back at the bridge. Finally, on March 21, 1965, he led the demonstrators—now thirty-two hundred strong—over the bridge once again. The march to Montgomery took five days.

Dan Budnik's photographs of these events, taken for *Life*, were never published; they are now on display in Selma's tiny National Voting Rights Museum. Once in Montgomery, King and his wife, Coretta, went to the airport to meet Harry Belafonte, and they are pictured here waiting. On March 25th, a crowd of twenty-five thousand gathered in front of the Alabama state capitol.

"I know you are asking today, 'How long will it take?' " King said. "I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

—*Elizabeth Kolbert*

that rate to rise steadily with each advancing year, as the number of mutations and genetic mistakes steadily accumulates. Breast cancer, by contrast, looked as if it were being driven by something specific to a woman's reproductive years. What was more, younger women who had had their ovaries removed had a markedly lower risk of breast cancer; when their bodies weren't producing estrogen and progestin every month, they got far fewer tumors. Pike and Henderson became convinced that breast cancer was linked to a process of cell division similar to that of ovarian and endometrial cancer. The female breast, after all, is just as sensitive to the level of hormones in a woman's body as the reproductive system. When the breast is exposed to estrogen, the cells of the terminal-duct lobular unit—where most breast cancer arises—undergo a flurry of division. And during the mid-to-late stage of the menstrual cycle, when the ovaries start producing large amounts of progestin, the pace of cell division in that region doubles.

It made intuitive sense, then, that a woman's risk of breast cancer would be linked to the amount of estrogen and progestin her breasts have been exposed to during her lifetime. How old a woman is at menarche should make a big difference, because the beginning of puberty results in a hormonal surge through a woman's body, and the breast cells of an adolescent appear to be highly susceptible to the errors that result in cancer. (For more complicated reasons, bearing children turns out to be protective against breast cancer, perhaps because in the last two trimesters of pregnancy the cells of the breast mature and become much more resistant to mutations.) How old a woman is at menopause should matter, and so should how much estrogen and progestin her ovaries actually produce, and even how much she weighs after menopause, because fat cells turn other hormones into estrogen.

Pike went to Hiroshima to test the cell-division theory. With other researchers at the medical archive, he looked first at the age when Japanese women got their period. A Japanese woman born at the turn of the century had her first period at sixteen and a half. American women born at the same time had their first period at fourteen. That difference alone, by their calculation, was sufficient to explain forty per cent of the gap between American and Japanese breast-cancer rates. "They had collected amazing records from the women of that area," Pike said. "You could follow precisely the change in age of menarche over the century. You could even see the effects of the Second World War. The age of menarche of Japanese girls went up right at that point because of poor nutrition and other hardships. And then it started to go back down after the war. That's what convinced me that the data were wonderful."

Pike, Henderson, and their colleagues then folded in the other risk factors. Age at menopause, age at first pregnancy, and number of children weren't sufficiently different between the two countries to matter. But weight was. The average post-menopausal Japanese woman weighed a hundred pounds; the average American woman weighed a hundred and forty-five pounds. That fact explained another twenty-five per cent of the difference. Finally, the researchers analyzed blood samples from women in rural Japan and China, and found that their ovaries—possibly because of their extremely low-fat diet—were producing about seventy-five per cent the amount of estrogen that American women were producing. Those three factors, added together, seemed to explain the breast-cancer gap. They also appeared to explain why the rates of breast cancer among Asian women began to increase when they came to America: on an American diet, they started to menstruate earlier, gained more weight, and produced more estrogen. The talk of chemicals and toxins and power lines and smog was set aside. "When people say that what we understand about breast cancer explains only a small amount of the problem, that it is somehow a mystery, it's absolute nonsense," Pike says flatly. He is a South African in his sixties, with graying hair and a salt-and-pepper beard. Along with Henderson, he is an eminent figure in cancer research, but no one would ever accuse him of being tentative in his pronouncements. "We understand breast cancer extraordinarily well. We understand it as well as we understand cigarettes and lung cancer."

What Pike discovered in Japan led him to think about the Pill, because a tablet that suppressed ovulation—and the monthly tides of estrogen and progestin that come with it—obviously had the potential to be a powerful anti-breast-cancer drug. But the breast was a little different from the reproductive organs. Progestin prevented ovarian cancer because it suppressed ovulation. It was good for preventing endometrial cancer because it countered the stimulating effects of estrogen. But in breast cells, Pike believed, progestin wasn't the solution; it was one of the hormones that *caused* cell division. This is one explanation for why, after years of studying the Pill, researchers have concluded that it has no effect one way or the other on breast cancer: whatever beneficial effect results from what the Pill does is cancelled out by how it does it. John Rock touted the fact that the Pill used progestin, because progestin was the body's own contraceptive. But Pike saw nothing "natural" about subjecting the breast to that heavy a dose of progestin. In his view, the amount of progestin and estrogen needed to make an effective contraceptive was much greater than the amount needed to keep the reproductive system healthy—and that excess was unnecessarily raising the risk of breast cancer. A truly natural Pill might be one that found a way to suppress ovulation *without* using progestin. Throughout the nineteen-eighties, Pike recalls, this was his obsession. "We were all trying to work out how the hell we could fix the Pill. We thought about it day and night."

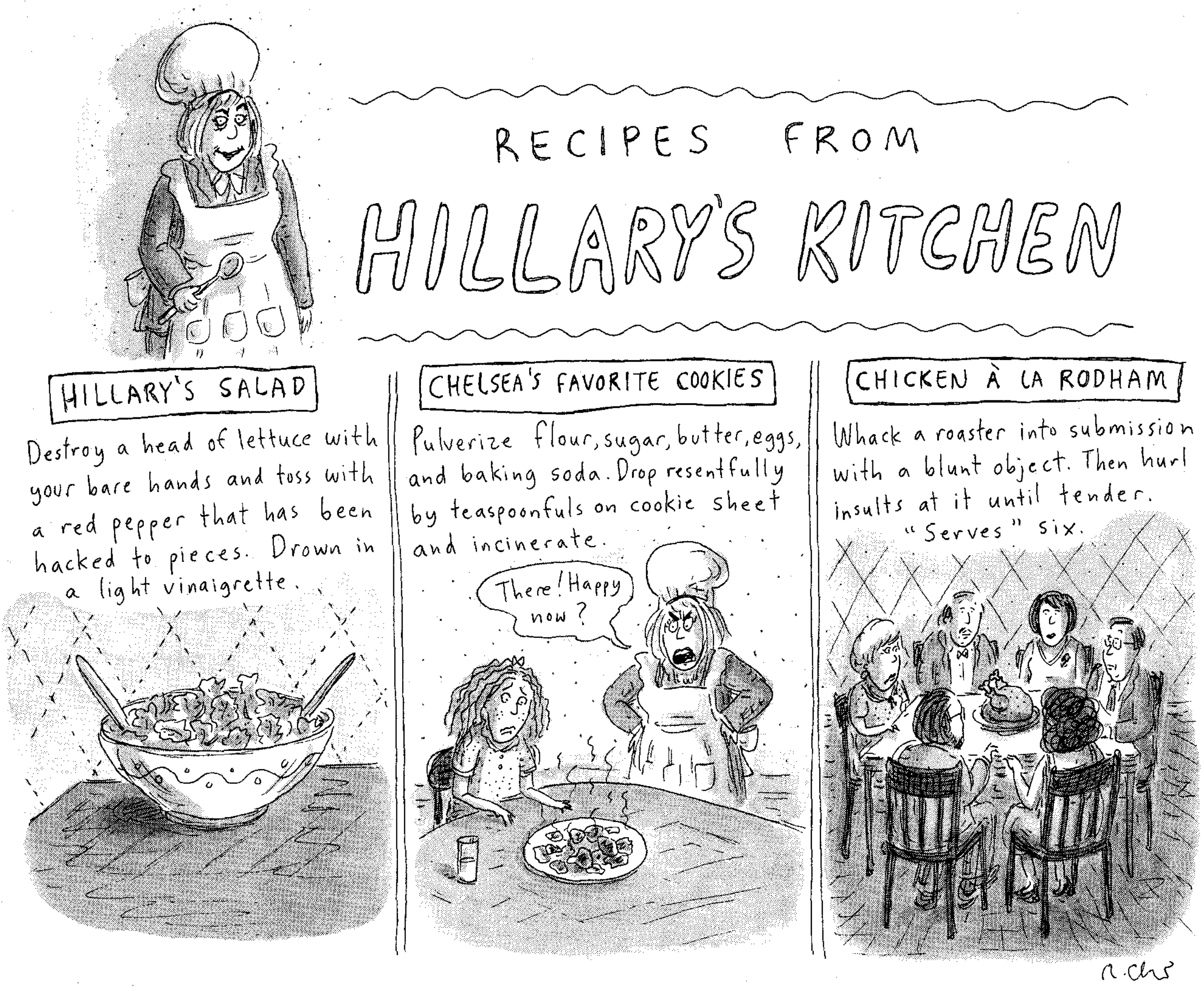
Pike's proposed solution is a class of drugs known as GnRHAs, which has been around for many years. GnRHAs disrupt the signals that the pituitary gland sends when it is attempting to order the manufacture of sex hormones. It's a circuit breaker. "We've got substantial experience with this drug," Pike says. Men suffering from prostate cancer are sometimes given a GnRHA to temporarily halt the production of testosterone, which can exacerbate their tumors. Girls suffering from what's called precocious puberty—puberty at seven or eight, or even younger—are sometimes given the drug to forestall sexual maturity. If you give GnRHA to women of childbearing age, it stops their ovaries from producing estrogen and progestin. If the conventional Pill works by convincing the body that it is, well, a little bit pregnant, Pike's pill would work by convincing the body that it was menopausal.

In the form Pike wants to use it, GnRHA will come in a clear glass bottle the size of a saltshaker, with a white plastic mister on top. It will be inhaled nasally. It breaks down in the body very quickly. A morning dose simply makes a woman menopausal for a while. Menopause, of course, has its risks. Women need estrogen to keep their hearts and bones strong. They also need progestin to keep the uterus healthy. So Pike intends to add back just enough of each hormone to solve these problems, but much less than women now receive on the Pill. Ideally, Pike says, the estrogen dose would be adjustable: women would try various levels until they found one that suited them. The progestin would come in four twelve-day stretches a year. When someone on Pike's regimen stopped the progestin, she would have one of four annual menses.

Pike and an oncologist named Darcy Spicer have joined forces with another oncologist, John Daniels, in a startup called Balance Pharmaceuticals. The firm operates out of a small white industrial strip mall next to the freeway in Santa Monica. One of the tenants is a paint store, another looks like some sort of export company. Balance's offices are housed in an oversized garage with a big overhead door and concrete floors. There is a tiny reception area, a little coffee table and a couch, and a warren of desks, bookshelves, filing cabinets, and computers. Balance is testing its formulation on a small group of women at high risk for breast cancer, and if the results continue to be encouraging, it will one day file for F.D.A. approval.

"When I met Darcy Spicer a couple of years ago," Pike said recently, as he sat at a conference table deep in the Balance garage, "he said, 'Why don't we just try it out? By taking mammograms, we should be able to see changes in the breasts of women on this drug, even if we add back a little estrogen to avoid side effects.' So we did a study, and we found that there were huge changes." Pike pulled out a paper he and Spicer had published in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, showing breast X-rays of three young women. "These are the mammograms of the women before they start," he said. Amid the grainy black outlines of the breast were large white fibrous clumps—clumps that Pike and Spicer believe are indicators of the kind of relentless cell division that increases breast-cancer risk. Next to those X-rays were three mammograms of the same women taken after a year on the GnRHA regimen. The clumps were almost entirely gone. "This to us represents that we have actually stopped the activity inside the breasts," Pike went on. "White is a proxy for cell proliferation. We're slowing down the breast."

Pike stood up from the table and


RECIPES FROM
HILLARY'S KITCHEN
HILLARY'S SALAD
Destroy a head of lettuce with your bare hands and toss with a red pepper that has been hacked to pieces. Drown in a light vinaigrette.
CHELSEA'S FAVORITE COOKIES
Pulverize flour, sugar, butter, eggs, and baking soda. Drop resentfully by teaspoonfuls on cookie sheet and incinerate.
There! Happy now?
CHICKEN À LA RODHAM
Whack a roaster into submission with a blunt object. Then hurl insults at it until tender. "Serves" six.
R. Chst

turned to a sketch pad on an easel behind him. He quickly wrote a series of numbers on the paper. "Suppose a woman reaches menarche at fifteen and menopause at fifty. That's thirty-five years of stimulating the breast. If you cut that time in half, you will change her risk not by half but by half raised to the power of 4.5." He was working with a statistical model he had developed to calculate breast-cancer risk. "That's one-twenty-third. Your risk of breast cancer will be one-twenty-third of what it would be otherwise. It won't be zero. You can't get to zero. If you use this for ten years, your risk will be cut by at least half. If you use it for five years, your risk will be cut by at least a third. It's as if your breast were to be five years younger, or ten years younger—*forever*." The regimen, he says, should also provide protection against ovarian cancer.

Pike gave the sense that he had made this little speech many times before, to colleagues, to his family and friends—and to investors. He knew by now how strange and unbelievable what he was saying sounded. Here he was, in a cold, cramped garage in the industrial section of Santa Monica, arguing that he knew how to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of women around the world. And he wanted to do that by making young women menopausal through a chemical regimen sniffed every morning out of a bottle. This was, to say the least, a bold idea. Could he strike the right balance between the hormone levels women need to stay healthy and those that ultimately make them sick? Was progestin really so important in breast cancer? There are cancer specialists who remain skeptical. And, most of all, what would women think? John Rock, at least, had lent the cause of birth control his Old World manners and distinguished white hair and appeals from theology; he took pains to make the Pill seem like the least radical of interventions—nature's contraceptive, something that could be slipped inside a woman's purse and pass without notice.

"She turned out to be my kind of horse but not my kind of woman."

Pike was going to take the whole forty-year mythology of "natural" and sweep it aside. "Women are going to think, I'm being manipulated here. And it's a perfectly reasonable thing to think." Pike's South African accent gets a little stronger as he becomes more animated. "But the modern way of living represents an extraordinary change in female biology. Women are going out and becoming lawyers, doctors, presidents of countries. They need to understand that what we are trying to do isn't abnormal. It's just as normal as when someone hundreds of years ago had menarche at seventeen and had five babies and had three hundred fewer menstrual cycles than most women have today. The world is not the world it was. And some of the risks that go with the benefits of a woman getting educated and not getting pregnant all the time are breast cancer and ovarian cancer, and we need to deal with it. I have three daughters. The earliest grandchild I had was when one of them was thirty-one. That's the way many women are now. They ovulate from twelve or thirteen until their early thirties. Twenty years of uninterrupted ovulation before their first child! That's a brand-new phenomenon!"

John Rock's long battle on behalf of his birth-control pill forced the Church to take notice. In the spring of 1963, just after Rock's book was published, a meeting was held at the Vatican between high officials of the Catholic Church and Donald B. Straus, the chairman of Planned Parenthood. That summit was followed by another, on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. In the summer of 1964, on the eve of the feast of St. John the Baptist, Pope Paul VI announced that he would ask a committee of Church officials to reëxamine the Vatican's position on contraception. The group met first at the Collegio San Jose, in Rome, and it was clear that a majority of the committee were in favor of approving the Pill. Committee reports leaked to the *National Catholic Register* confirmed that Rock's case appeared to be winning. Rock was elated. *Newsweek* put him on its cover, and ran a picture of the Pope inside. "Not since the Copernicans suggested in the sixteenth century that the sun was the center of the planetary system has the Roman

Catholic Church found itself on such a perilous collision course with a new body of knowledge," the article concluded. Paul VI, however, was unmoved. He stalled, delaying a verdict for months, and then years. Some said he fell under the sway of conservative elements within the Vatican. In the interim, theologians began exposing the holes in Rock's arguments. The rhythm method " 'prevents' conception by abstinence, that is, by the non-performance of the conjugal act during the fertile period," the Catholic journal *America* concluded in a 1964 editorial. "The pill prevents conception by suppressing ovulation and by thus abolishing the fertile period. No amount of word juggling can make abstinence from sexual relations and the suppression of ovulation one and the same thing." On July 29, 1968, in the "Humanae Vitae" encyclical, the Pope broke his silence, declaring all "artificial" methods of contraception to be against the teachings of the Church.

In hindsight, it is possible to see the opportunity that Rock missed. If he had known what we know now and had talked about the Pill not as a contraceptive but as a cancer drug—not as a drug to prevent life but as one that would save life—the Church might well have said yes. Hadn't Pius XII already approved the Pill for therapeutic purposes? Rock would only have had to think of the Pill as Pike thinks of it: as a drug whose contraceptive aspects are merely a means of attracting users, of getting, as Pike put it, "people who are young to take a lot of stuff they wouldn't otherwise take."

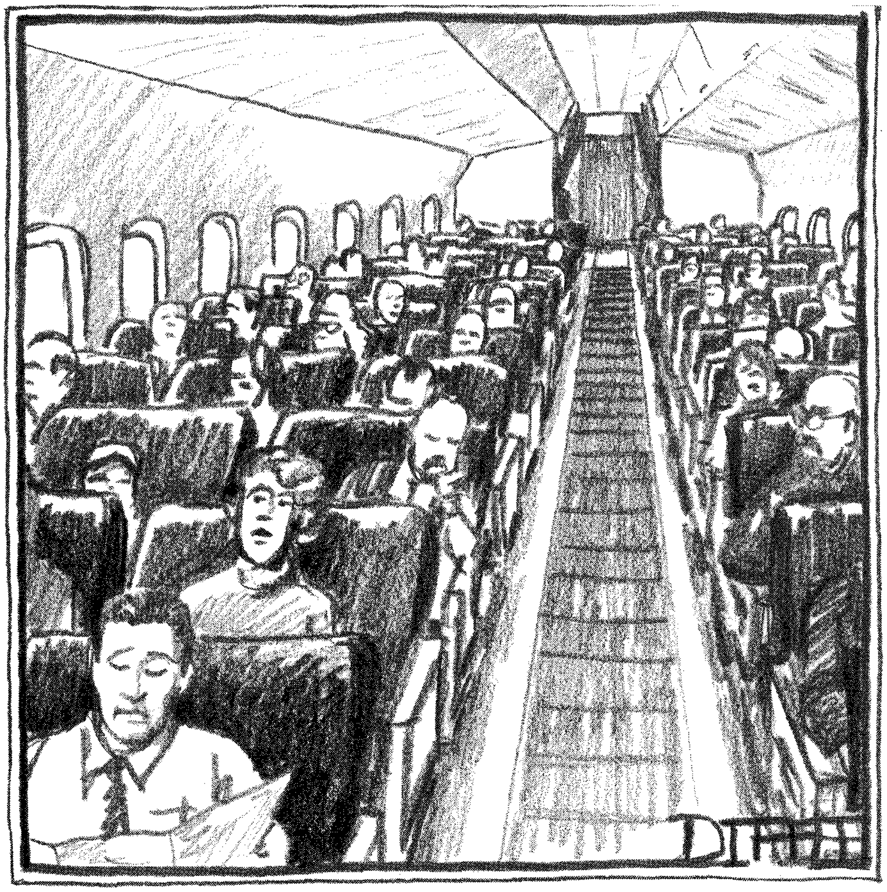
But Rock did not live long enough to understand how things might have been. What he witnessed, instead, was the terrible time at the end of the sixties when the Pill suddenly stood accused—wrongly—of causing blood clots, strokes, and heart attacks. Between the mid-seventies and the early eighties, the number of women in the United States using the Pill fell by half. Harvard Medical School, meanwhile, took over Rock's Reproductive Clinic and pushed him out. His Harvard pension paid him only seventy-five dollars a year. He had almost no money in the bank and had to sell his house in Brookline. In 1971, Rock left Boston and retreated to a farmhouse in the hills of New Hampshire. He swam in the stream behind the house. He listened to John Philip Sousa marches. In the evening, he would sit in the living room with a pitcher of Martinis. In 1983, he gave his last public interview, and it was as if the memory of his achievements was now so painful that he had blotted it out.

He was asked what the most gratifying time of his life was. "Right now," the inventor of the Pill answered, incredibly. He was sitting by the fire in a crisp white shirt and tie, reading "The Origin," Irving Stone's fictional account of the life of Darwin. "It frequently occurs to me, gosh, what a lucky guy I am. I have no responsibilities, and I have everything I want. I take a dose of equanimity every twenty minutes. I will not be disturbed about things."

Once, John Rock had gone to seven-o'clock Mass every morning and kept a crucifix above his desk. His interviewer, the writer Sara Davidson, moved her chair closer to his and asked him whether he still believed in an afterlife.

"Of course I don't," Rock answered abruptly. Though he didn't explain why, his reasons aren't hard to imagine. The Church could not square the requirements of its faith with the results of his science, and if the Church couldn't reconcile them how could Rock be expected to? John Rock always stuck to his conscience, and in the end his conscience forced him away from the thing he loved most. This was not John Rock's error. Nor was it his church's. It was the fault of the haphazard nature of science, which all too often produces progress in advance of understanding. If the order of events in the discovery of what was natural had been reversed, his world, and our world, too, would have been a different place.

"Heaven and Hell, Rome, all the Church stuff—that's for the solace of the multitude," Rock said. He had only a year to live. "I was an ardent practicing Catholic for a long time, and I really believed it all then, you see." ♦



"And, folks, if you'll take a look out the right side of the plane you'll see a cloud that looks exactly like a pirate."

PROFILES

TAKING HUMOR SERIOUSLY

George Meyer, the funniest man behind the funniest show on TV.

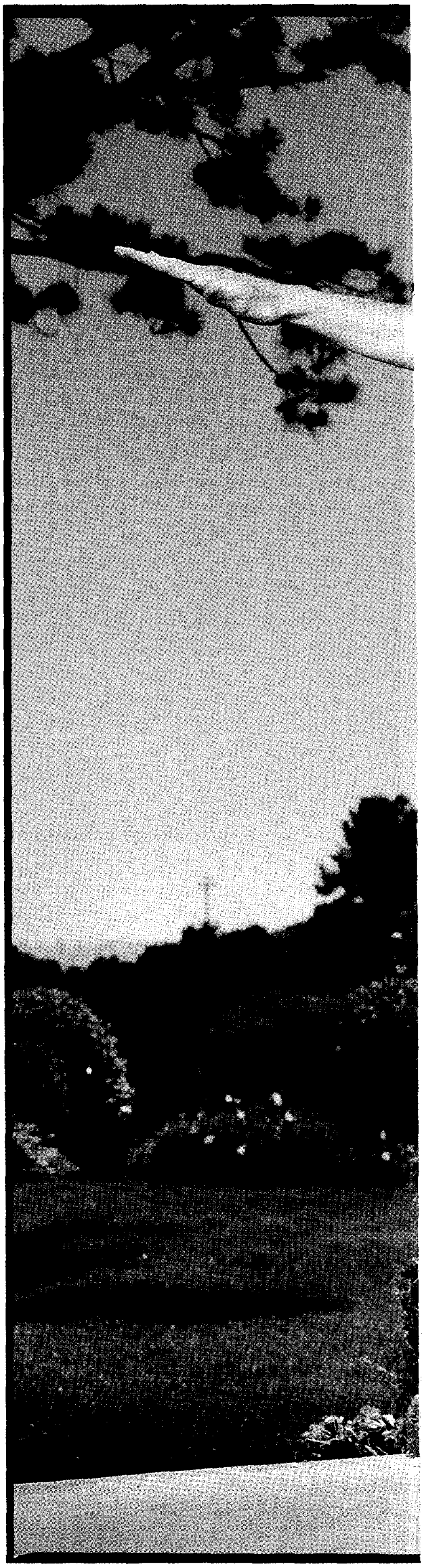
BY DAVID OWEN

Several years ago, *Entertainment Weekly* ran an effusive review of the television show "The Simpsons." The review's author, Ken Tucker, singled out a particular episode as "a masterpiece of tiny, throwaway details that accumulate into a worldview." That episode was written by Jon Vitti, who at the time was one of the show's most talented and prolific writers. "The article quoted five jokes from the show," Vitti told me afterward. "It was extremely flattering—except that I hadn't written any of those jokes." Everything Tucker quoted from the episode was actually the work of a colleague of Vitti's named George Meyer. "That kind of thing happens to all the show's writers all the time," Vitti said. "A show that you have the writer's credit for will run, and the next day people will come up to you and tell you how great it was. Then they'll mention their two favorite lines, and both of them will be George's."

Meyer began writing for "The Simpsons" late in 1989, a few months before the show's première, on Fox. The credits in recent years have listed him as one of several executive producers, but no title could adequately describe his role. He has so thoroughly shaped the program that by now the comedic sensibility of "The Simpsons" could be viewed as mostly his. Mike Scully, who shares Meyer's title and serves as the program's "show runner," or editor-in-chief, talked to me about Meyer not long ago in his office at Fox. "George is the best comedy writer in Hollywood," he said. "When I first came to work here, seven years ago, he just blew me away. I had done a lot of sitcom work before, but George's stuff was so different and so original that for a while I wondered if I wasn't in over my head." On other sitcoms, Scully explained, the dialogue is highly predictable, and the same kinds of setups inevitably lead to the same kinds of jokes. "The writers on those shows get to the point where they can almost write scripts in their sleep," he said. "George completely changed my approach, and I'm a much better writer as a result. People are always asking why 'The Simpsons' is still so good after all these years, and, at the risk of pissing off all the other writers, I think I'd have to say that the main reason is probably George."

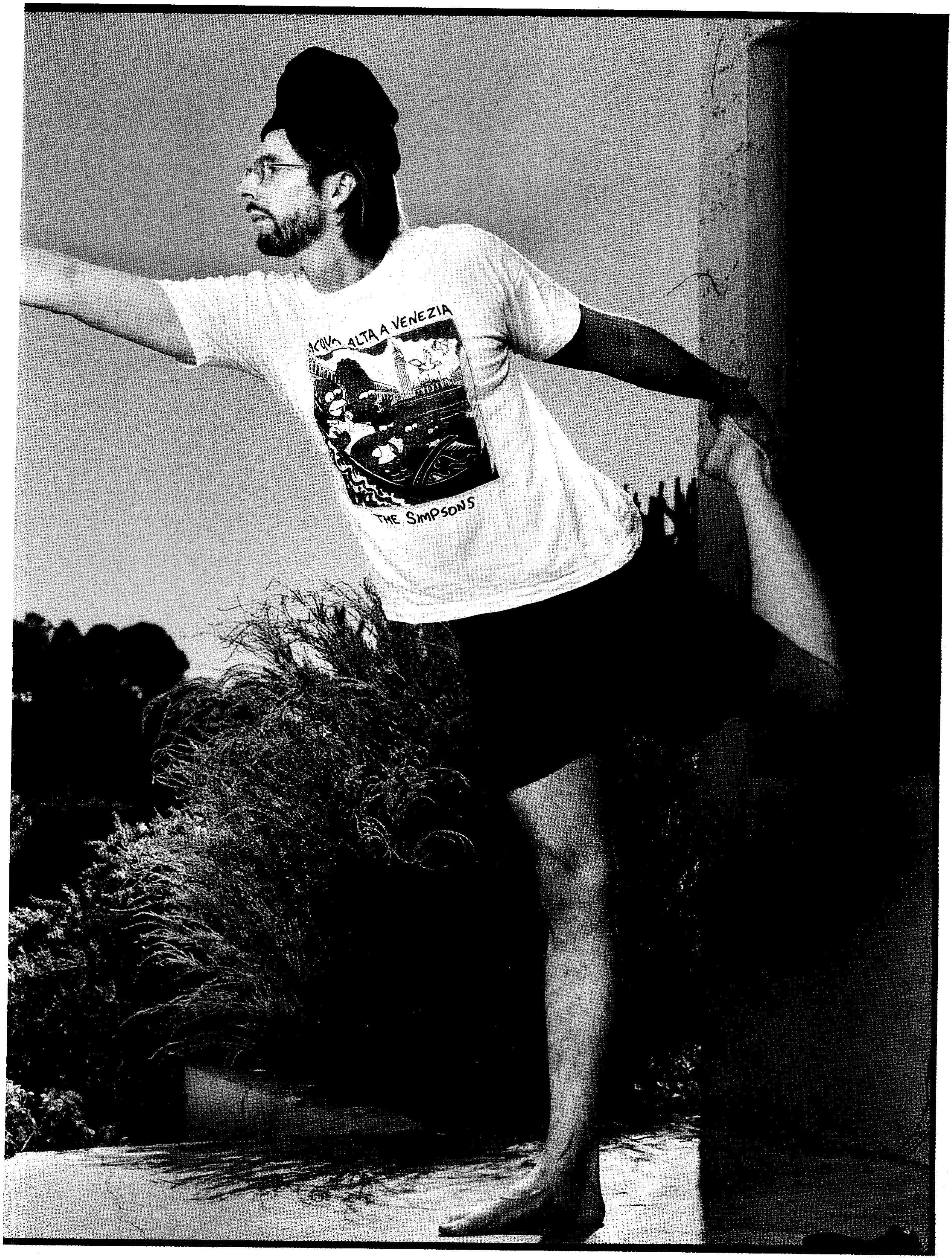
"The Simpsons" is now in its eleventh season; on the beach last summer, I overheard my teen-age daughter and several of her friends trading favorite lines from favorite episodes, some of which dated back almost to their toddlerhood. Longevity like that is rare in television, especially for a sitcom. Even more unusual is the breadth of the show's popularity. My wife and I watch "The Simpsons" as avidly as our children do, and we have for years; it's the only show we all watch together, the only one we plan meals around, and the only one during which we don't read, fold laundry, or talk. The program from the start has had a large and loyal following among Hispanics (whose ardor explains a semi-cryptic message superimposed on the screen at the beginning of every episode: "SAP Transmitido en Español"). College students still regularly rate it the best show on TV. *Time* recently named it the best television program of the twentieth century.

People who disparage "The Simpsons" (or who forbid their children to watch it) often do so reflexively, without ever having seen it. They assume that the show is tasteless, sophomoric, and profane—like, say, "South Park," a crude cartoon whose principal claim to fame is that its characters use bad words. Animation aside, though, "South Park" shares almost nothing with "The Simpsons," which I think is not only the funniest but also the most literate show on TV—a program that, in the words of the poet Robert Pinsky, a longtime fan,



"Humor has to reframe reality," Meyer says. "It's

SABA


ACQUA ALTA A VENEZIA
THE SIMPSONS

like seeing in two dimensions and then looking through a View-Master and suddenly seeing in three." Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

"I begged him to get help."

"penetrates to the nature of television itself." Pinsky's observation points to the main source of the show's strength: to a degree that is almost unheard-of on television, "The Simpsons" belongs to its writers.

Because animation is an enormously labor-intensive and time-consuming process, preparing the visual images for each "Simpsons" episode requires most of a year. Meyer and his colleagues take advantage of that long gestation by repeatedly adding and deleting jokes, inserting scenes, lengthening or shortening pauses by fractions of a second, and calling for rereadings of individual lines by the show's company of vocal performers (who, because they don't appear on camera, tend to be far more tractable than Hollywood stars).

Such care creates a textual density that makes each episode seem to last far longer than half an hour. It also gives rise to innumerable small touches that reward attentive viewing, among them a local beauty parlor called the Perm Bank; the word "yoink," a coinage of Meyer's, which characters sometimes utter in the act of snatching something; and a greeting posted outside the Springfield Community Church following a hurricane— "God Welcomes His Victims." The scripts contain allusions to books and movies and other television shows, and they are strewn with enchanting obscurities, such as the fact that Montgomery Burns, the dark-hearted owner of the local nuclear power plant, uses a version of the telephone salutation promoted unsuccessfully by Alexander Graham Bell: "Ahoy, ahoy."

Most of the creative work on "The Simpsons" takes place at big tables in two nondescript conference spaces at Fox, which are collectively known as "the rewrite room"—or, simply, "the room." This is where stories are conceived, fleshed out, and tinkered with, and where Meyer, according to his colleagues, is the master. He is considered by the show's executives to be so valuable in the room that he is seldom excused from editing duties to produce complete scripts of his own. Instead, he spends almost every weekday reshaping and polishing the work of his collaborators. Last summer, I accompanied Meyer to Fox one day and sat in on a long rewrite session, during which he and half a dozen colleagues were fussing over a crudely animated early version of an upcoming episode. Most of the jokes and ideas proffered by the writers at the table provoked no reaction whatsoever. (Polite laughter is considered counterproductive.) The atmosphere was less that of a comedy club than of a high-school classroom in which none of the students have done the assigned reading—evidence that the toughest audience for a comedian is a roomful of other comedians. I sat near the back wall and observed a phenomenon that Mike Reiss, a longtime writer, had alerted me to: "Simpsons" writers involuntarily glance at Meyer for approval when they pitch lines of their own. (Ian Maxtone-Graham, another writer, recently told a reporter, "I would rather make George Meyer laugh than get an Emmy.")

The lines that did inspire laughs that day were usually Meyer's. I recalled a story that Mike Scully had told me earlier, about the most intense laughter he had ever heard in the rewrite room. The incident had occurred several years before, on a day when the staff was working on a subplot in which Homer, at a police auction, buys an impounded muscle car that formerly belonged to the town's resident criminal, Snake. Snake wants the car back, so he escapes from jail and contrives a recovery scheme worthy of Wile E. Coyote: he stretches a wire across a road in the hope of decapitating Homer as he drives by. The wire misses Homer, but his car is followed closely by another.

"The driver of the second car is holding a sandwich at a ridiculous angle high up over his head and saying, 'I told that idiot to slice my sandwich,' " Scully explained. "That's where we were going with the joke. But then George suddenly said, 'What if the wire cuts off his arm?' That made the people in the room laugh so hard that they were coughing—they were literally choking—because the joke was so unexpected. It was a shocked kind of laugh, and it just started rolling, one of those laughs that build the more they reverberate through you." Jon Vitti once told me that laughter inspired by Meyer's best jokes has a unique, open-mouthed sound, because people are surprised at the same time that they are laughing: "It's like what they say about baseball players—that you can identify a batter by the sound of his bat hitting the ball."

In a group of a dozen or more very funny and competitive people, Vitti said, it would be unusual for any writer to come up with two jokes in a row which made their way into a final script. He recalled a "Simpsons" rewrite session, however, during which Meyer at one point had supplied six consecutive jokes—a notable feat even for him. When the staff turned its attention to the next troublesome line, one of the other writers began to speak. Mike Reiss, who was running the meeting, held up his hand and said, "Sh-h-h. George is thinking."

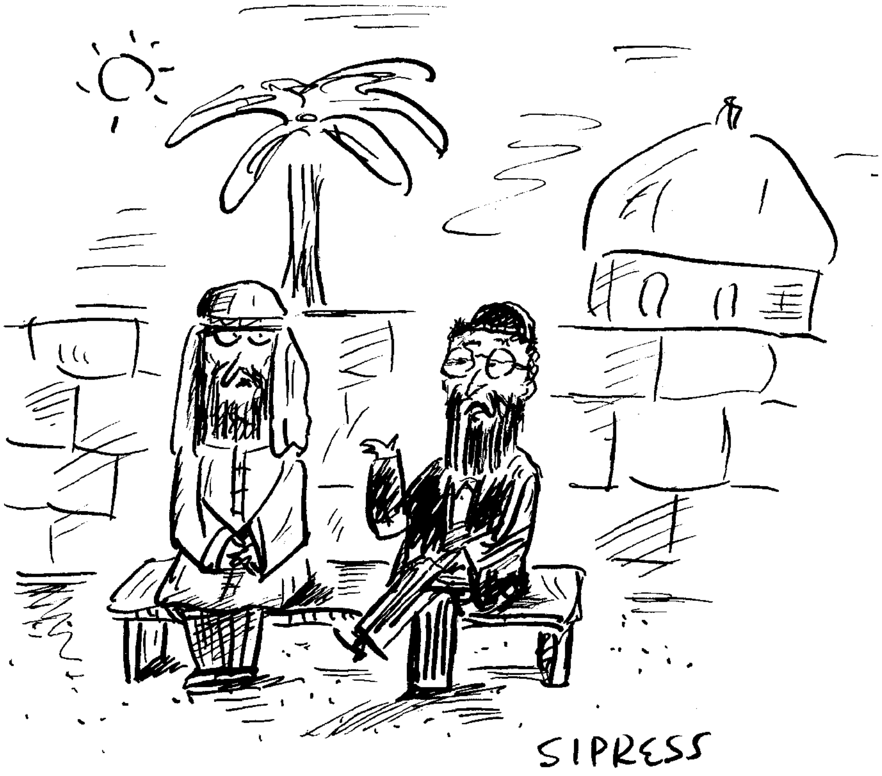
Meyer is forty-three years old. He has a scruffy beard and straight blondish hair that hangs not quite to his shoulders. His hair often falls across his eyes, and when it does he will sometimes lurch forward at the waist and then violently straighten up to throw it back out of the way. He wears wire-rimmed glasses, and he has big hands and big feet. He likes hats; among his favorites are a wide-brimmed white canvas bucket hat, which he wears to keep the sun off his face, and a baseball cap with a logo advertising a heavyweight title fight between Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield—a fight that had to be cancelled when Tyson was convicted of rape. For several years, he wore a woven wristband that he bought at one of the seventy or eighty Grateful Dead concerts he attended during the last five years of Jerry Garcia's life. He is a student of yoga and a strict vegetarian. He is a couple of inches over six feet tall, and he looks taller, because he stands and sits very straight. He walks so fast that other people often have to trot to keep up with him. He has an infectious, staccato laugh, which sometimes seems slightly maniacal.

I've known Meyer for almost twenty-five years. We met at Harvard, where we were classmates and members of the writing staff of the *Lampoon*, the college's humor magazine. He was by an order of magnitude the funniest person I knew. I remember a two-panel cartoon that he drew one night when we were seniors. Meyer is no artist; the drawing (which was scrawled on a sheet of notebook paper) could have passed for the work of a demented third grader. But the joke made a big impression on me. In the cartoon's first panel, a guy was screaming "You asshole!" as he split another guy's head with an axe. In the second panel, the killer was being led away by a cop and muttering, "Me and my big mouth."

The violence of that cartoon belies Meyer's own gentleness, and his almost tender empathy for others. The writer Jack Handey, with whom Meyer once shared an office, says, "It's almost as though George believed it would be bad karma to say anything bad about another person." One of Meyer's sisters says that he was once moved nearly to tears upon spotting a store for left-handed people—a business that he felt was doomed, and that later inspired the Leftorium, a struggling enterprise owned by the Simpsons' neighbor Ned Flanders.

Meyer is also unassuming about his talents, and about the high points of his career. Maria Semple, a television writer who lived with him from the early nineties until last year, when they broke up, told me, "On our first date, George took me to the state fair. It was his birthday, which he didn't tell me, and he was up for an Emmy that night, which he also didn't tell me. He kept checking his watch, so I thought I was boring him, but then, later, when we were in the car, he said, 'I've got to find a place where I can change into this'—and there in the back seat was a tuxedo." "The Simpsons" did win an Emmy that night, but Semple learned about it only by reading the newspaper the next day.

Like a shocking number of relatively

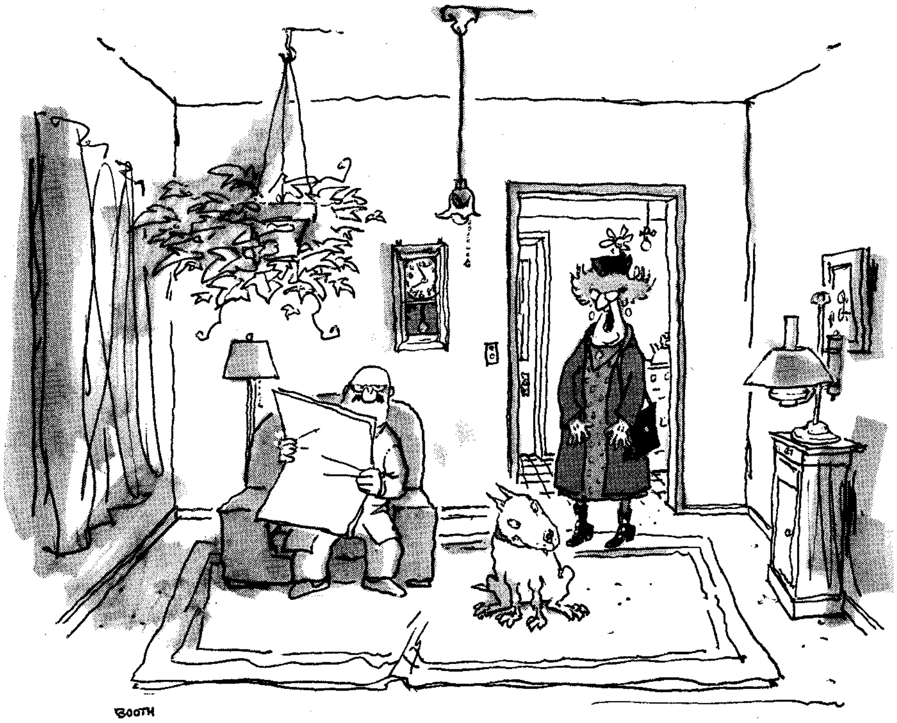


"Why is it we never focus on the things that unite us, like falafel?"

young people in Hollywood, Meyer has made so much money that continuing to work has become essentially optional. Still, his only significant acquisition so far has been a small gray stucco house situated within sugar-borrowing distance of the houses of Marlon Brando and Jack Nicholson, in northern Beverly Hills, high in the Santa Monica Mountains. From the yard—a lush, compact mesa bordered by well-tended shrubbery—you can look north to the San Fernando Valley, south to the Los Angeles Basin and to the Santa Monica Bay, and straight down onto a stucco-and-clay-tile interpretation of Versailles owned by Vanna White. On the nearly vertical slope between White's house and Meyer's is an infant vineyard—the modern Hollywood equivalent of the vegetable garden—which also belongs to White.

Meyer's house is handsomely but not ostentatiously decorated. Among its appointments are various items from his extensive collection of space-program memorabilia, an interest he discovered several years ago through his "Simpsons" colleague John Swartzwelder (who is the author of Meyer's all-time favorite "Simpsons" line, a toast in which Homer calls alcohol "the cause of—and solution to—all of life's problems"). The collection includes a letter signed by Barbara Morgan, who was Christa McAuliffe's understudy for the doomed flight of the Challenger; seven cigarette lighters that once belonged to the astronaut Dick Gordon; a knife designed to cut space-capsule parachute cords which was once owned by the astronaut Gordon Cooper; and a flare gun that supposedly had been part of a survival kit carried in Korea by the astronaut Buzz Aldrin. In a bathroom near the front door is a small, unironic shrine to Jerry Garcia, who for several years was probably the closest thing in Meyer's life to a spiritual figure. In the living room is a television set on which he watches little except professional football games and documentaries. ("I can watch a documentary about anything," he told me. "I could watch a store surveillance camera. I just love reality.")

Meyer's interest in professional football is strictly pragmatic: unlike most vegetarian, yoga-practicing, Deadhead collectors of space-program memorabilia, he is a studious and enthusiastic gambler. He spent many hours at the dog track when we were in college, and during a period in the early eighties when he lived in New York, his single sartorial flourish was a three-piece suit, which he wore on days when there was a heavyweight title fight. He is well acquainted with the short flight from Los Angeles to Las Vegas.



"I am going to SoHo. My doshas are all out of balance. Well, my kapha is hunky-dory, but my pitta and vata are out of whack. Today the practitioner is going to get rid of all the stress with geranium, ylang-ylang, bergamot, and patchouli, and, of course, a little time in the steam tent."

Parked in the driveway outside Meyer's house is a Honda Civic, which he ordered without an air-conditioner, because he believes that air-conditioning is an environmentally irresponsible excess. The car is too cramped to comfortably contain two grown men, so when I visit him in Los Angeles—as I have done several times in the past few years—we usually take my rental car when we go anywhere. If we are driving in the city, I typically have to ask him every mile or so if we are still heading in the right direction, because I don't know my way around and his mind tends to wander. On one occasion a few years ago, he became preoccupied by the thought that somewhere within the metropolitan area at that moment Dean Martin was probably either waking up or eating breakfast—in his view, a selling point for L.A.

Billboards and window signs also derail his train of thought. He hates advertising, which he views as a global force of destruction. ("I hate it because it irresponsibly induces discontent in people for one myopic goal, and then it leaves the debris of that process out there in the culture. An advertiser will happily make you feel bad about yourself if that will make you buy, say, a Bic pen.") This antipathy has made Meyer a connoisseur of brazen marketing; he is especially interested in examples of ad copy in which the word-to-falsehood ratio approaches one. He once showed me a magazine advertisement for a butter substitute called Country Crock. "It's not from the country; there is no crock," he said. "Two words, two lies."

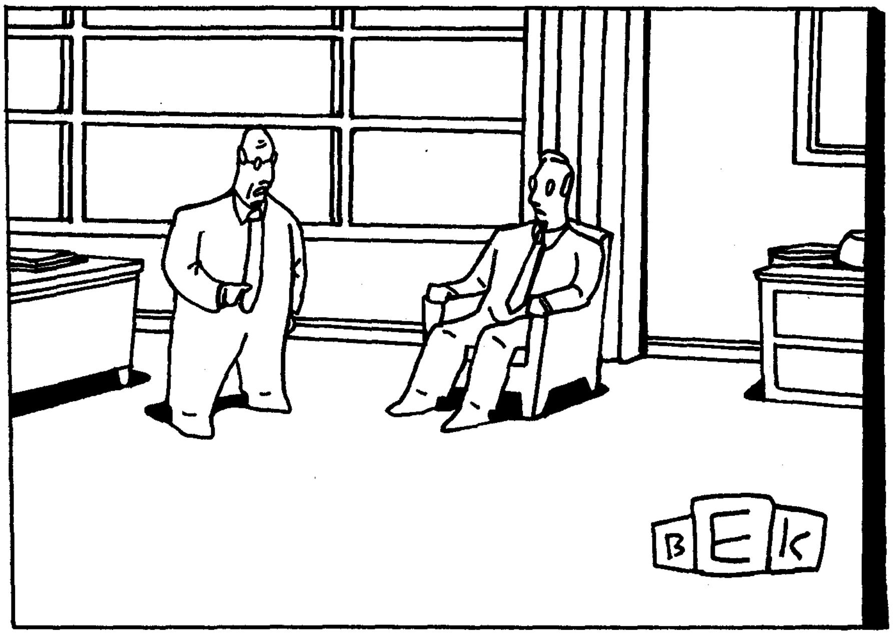
In the car one day, as we missed another turn, he said, "I love to ask people what their favorite product is."

I couldn't think of mine immediately, so I asked him what his was.

"Um, gee," he said, and he looked out the window and laughed. "I guess I don't know." He thought for a moment. "There's a tool that I bought that probably ought to be my favorite product, because it's very elegantly designed. It's a pair of pliers, it's a knife, it's a screwdriver. I love it. But I never use it." He looked out the window again. "The most bang for your buck would have to be LSD, I guess," he said. "Don't you think? Because it's, like, five bucks, and then you go crazy, and maybe you'll even jump out a window. Can you imagine? It might change your life, and it might make you drop out of society. That's really a lot."

Meyer grew up in Arizona, the eldest of eight children in a Catholic family of mostly German descent. His parents still live in Tucson. (His mother sells residential real estate, and his father has held a variety of jobs, most of them in real estate or consulting.) "There were so many of us that there weren't a lot of family activities," he told me. "Usually you would make your own plans. Sometimes we would all go to SeaWorld or something, but the family was so big that it was hard to mobilize for anything. You can see why the military is run by people who are constantly yelling and screaming. It seems like an inefficient strategy, but it does get the job done, in a way." His parents were demanding, and his relationship with his father was often turbulent. One of his sisters had previously told me, "My parents had the habit of saying that one or another of us was the cause of all the family's problems, in those exact words. Who it was would change from week to week, but mostly it was George."

Life in large families is filled with logistical challenges. (Meyer's mother used to place dental-appointment cards in the tops of the children's stockings at Christmas.) People who grow up with many siblings tend to want either large families of their own or no families at all; Meyer and his siblings, the youngest of whom is now thirty-one, have thus far produced three marriages and just two children. Meyer once told a friend that he didn't believe in marriage, and that he would never have children because he felt he had already helped to raise seven of them. When my wife and I got married, shortly after college, he responded to our wedding invitation with a brief note: "I hope it works out."



"Now you're going to be procrastinating with the big boys."

As a child, Meyer struggled not only with family responsibilities but also with his parents' religious beliefs. "I felt like I was a happy kid," he told me, "but I did feel that I was made to shoulder a lot of burdens that shouldn't have been mine—such as the frustrations of older women wearing nun costumes. People talk about how horrible it is to be brought up Catholic, and it's all true. The main thing was that there was no sense of proportion. I would chew a piece of gum at school, and the nun would say, 'Jesus is very angry with you about that,' and on the wall behind her would be a dying, bleeding guy on a cross. That's a horrifying image to throw at a little kid. You really could almost think that your talking in line, say, was on a par with killing Jesus. You just weren't sure, and there was never a moderating voice. Once, I was sent to the principal's office, and when I went in my parents were sitting there. They had been summoned somehow. God, that was scary. I would have been very unhappy, but not particularly surprised, if they had said, 'This time you have gone too far. Now you must die.' I would have thought, Oh, fuck—well, I did go too far. I would not have thought, No, no, this can't be happening! No sense of proportion. That's why one of my favorite forms of black humor is the casual cruelty of bureaucrats and doctors—like, 'Here's the rod we're going to put in your spine.' "

Meyer watched a huge amount of television when he was growing up—his childhood coincided with a period in which TV was not yet so old as to have become widely perceived as injurious to the mental well-being of young people who ingested it in large doses—and his memory of nineteen-sixties programming is acute.

"I just watched everything," he told me, "and always with the same slack expression on my face. I watched so much and from such an early age, in fact, that I didn't understand what TV was for. I say this to people and they think I'm kidding, but I didn't realize that 'The Dick Van Dyke Show' was supposed to be funny. I thought you just watched it. The people said things, and they moved around, and you just waited till you saw the kid—you know, you liked to see Richie. My brothers and sisters and I rarely laughed at anything we watched. We watched more to learn what the world was like and how adults interacted, and what a cocktail party was, what a night club was, what you did on a sea cruise—although I did like shows where the joke would be that somebody got shot or fell out of a window. When you're a kid, you like to see adults getting away with stuff, because you hope to join them one day in anarchy and mayhem."

Meyer also liked "The Wild, Wild West," "Get Smart," and other shows with lots of gadgets. "I believed that all those things existed," he said, "and that the adults had just locked them away somewhere. I thought it was only a matter of time until I would have my own shoe phone, and I couldn't understand why people owned station wagons when there were perfectly good Batmobiles out there just waiting to be driven." He spent much of his childhood yearning not only for those gadgets but also for the toys he saw in commercials, and he became resourceful at finding ways to acquire at least a few of them. He sold helium balloons at a rodeo parade, painted house numbers on neighbors' curbs (avoiding addresses containing the numeral 8, for which he didn't own a stencil), and paid his brothers and sisters twenty dollars each to stand in line for several hours to buy tickets for a Rolling Stones concert which he later scalped. Once, when he was desperately envious of a friend who had a rock tumbler, he gave up trying to persuade his parents to buy one for him and built his own. "I studied the technology," he told me, "and then I had a brainstorm. I took a glass jar and filled it with some rocks I wanted to polish, and I added some sand and water, and then I taped it to the hubcap of my dad's car. I thought, We'll just go to church, and when we get back the rocks will be polished. But the whole thing fell off before we were out of the driveway."

Meyer's parents had extremely high expectations for all the children. His mother used to say, "We're not just winners—we're super winners" (a term that Meyer later used in a sketch on "Saturday Night Live"). He and his siblings felt pressure to succeed but enjoyed little sense of personal accomplishment when they did, because their triumphs were taken for granted—a dilemma that one of his sisters described to me as "a lose-lose situation." Meyer became a model teen-ager: a straight-A student, a member of his school's speech team, the editor of the student newspaper, an Eagle Scout, and an altar boy.

The single most important influence on his intellectual and moral development, however, was *Mad* magazine. Meyer would accompany his mother on evening trips to the grocery store, then stand in front of the magazine rack reading the latest issue while she shopped. On the drive home, he would read a few lines each time the car passed under a street lamp. (One of Meyer's most prized possessions today is an issue of *Mad* in which he himself is depicted, in a two-page spread called "A *Mad* Peek Behind the Scenes at 'The Simpsons' Studio.") He remembers being particularly struck by a parody of "Dennis the Menace." He told me, "It was a cartoon that showed Dennis coming into the house holding a skull, and the caption was something like 'Hey, Mom, look what I found in Mr. Wilson's head.' That absolutely put me away. The next day, my stomach muscles hurt from laughing. I felt like I'd been worked over by bullies."

Meyer still admires that cartoon, because, he says, it led him to a significant insight about humor. "It jumps a step, and to me the best comedy always jumps a step," he explains. "Dennis could have said, 'Mom, I killed Mr. Wilson and here's his head,' and Mrs. Mitchell could have said, 'Oh, Dennis,' or something like that, and I still would have thought it was pretty funny, because part of the humor for me was simply that a kid had killed an adult. But, Jesus, what a great joke. Michael O'Donoghue"—the late writer for *National Lampoon* and "Saturday Night Live"—"used to say that humor has to be startling, and I agree with that. It has to reframe reality in a way that is exciting. It's like seeing in two dimensions and then opening the other eye or looking through a View-Master and suddenly seeing in three."

Humor, for Meyer, became the key to emotional survival. His sister Ann—who is married to Jon Vitti—once said to me, "People sometimes ask me why all the kids in our family have a sense of humor, and I just think it was that or die. The choices were very limited. For George, it was an extremely hard task to be the eldest in a group of eight, and the fact that he was incredibly intelligent made it even harder for him. The rest of us were all a little afraid of him, because he was older, but he took care of us and we looked up to him, and he really made us laugh. He used to dislike the show 'All in the Family,' partly because he could see the jokes coming a mile away. There was one episode where Archie is tempted to have an affair with a waitress, and then Edith finds a piece of paper with the waitress's phone number written on it and asks him, in this trembling voice, 'Archie, whose phone number is this?' We all used to repeat that line, and George would crack us up by screeching it, in this quavering imitation of Jean Stapleton's voice. At Thanksgiving dinner one year, my mother made us all write down what we were thankful for, and three of us, completely independently, wrote 'Archie, whose phone number is this?' My mother was exasperated, because she was reading these things aloud. Meanwhile, we were all laughing so hard that we were crying."

Midway through his sophomore year at Harvard, Meyer won a spot on the writing staff of the *Lampoon* and, for the first time in his life, found himself surrounded by people who looked at the world more or less as he did. The magazine is housed in a quirky, wedge-shaped building near Harvard Square called the Castle, which for more than ninety years has served as a sort of Masonic lodge for former class clowns. Inside the Castle, Meyer felt truly at home.

"I don't think most people like to laugh as much as I do," he says today. "Most people, sure, they like to laugh, but it's down on their list, like No. 8. At the *Lampoon*, though, people took humor very seriously. There was nothing more important on earth than laughing and making other people laugh. That changed my life. The *Lampoon* was the only voice of anarchy in the whole school, except for maybe the Spartacist Youth League." He was elected president of the *Lampoon* midway through his junior year.

Outside of the *Lampoon*, Meyer was mostly miserable at Harvard. Distracted by the allure of the Castle, he made good but not exemplary grades, and he suffered from a gnawing fear that he was screwing up. Immediately after he became president of the *Lampoon*, a group of staid types on the business staff tried to overthrow him in a bitter and vituperative internal battle, because they thought he wasn't responsible enough to run the magazine. Meyer not only survived that coup but also, characteristically, became a close friend of his principal rival, Steven Crist. (Their friendship was forged partly at the greyhound track; Crist today is the editor and publisher of the *Daily Racing Form.*) He had two close brushes with suspension—once for failing to deliver a refrigerator he had sold to a freshman, and once for smashing a dorm-room window with an electric guitar. He was often depressed, sometimes deeply so. "At one point," he recalls, "I took the sheets off my bed and put blue Christmas lights around the mattress, and just slept on the bare mattress. I did it partly as a joke, and partly not. It had something to do with a U.F.O. landing strip, or something. And for a while I set my room's thermostat at exactly one hundred degrees. I honestly don't know what I was thinking. I do remember seeing notices advertising the university's counselling service and thinking, Who in the heck is so crazy that they would go in and talk to those people? And the truth is that I should have been there most of the day."

This dark interlude in Meyer's life continued after he graduated, in 1978. He had applied to medical school and was accepted, but he never enrolled. He spent a brief period at home, in Tucson, then scraped together fifteen hundred dollars and moved to Denver, where he intended to use "scientific" handicapping methods to make a fortune at the dog track. He rented a cheap motel room and spent his days studying tip sheets at the Denver Public Library. Despite his diligent research, though, he ran through his stake in just two weeks and had no choice but to admit defeat and move back in with his parents. He then tried and failed to make a living as a substitute teacher, a research assistant in a medical laboratory, a salesman in a clothing store, and a television game-show contestant. (He won a little more than two thousand dollars on "Jeopardy"—his largest paycheck by far during his first two years after college. On the show, he had a five-day plan for making a growing nuisance of himself. Eliminated after one day, he didn't get past the plan's first phase: incessantly using the first name of the show's host, Art Fleming.)

Meyer's life as an adult didn't begin to come together until 1981, when he got a call from the office of a semi-obscure comedian named David Letterman. Letterman was about to be given a late-night slot on NBC, follow-

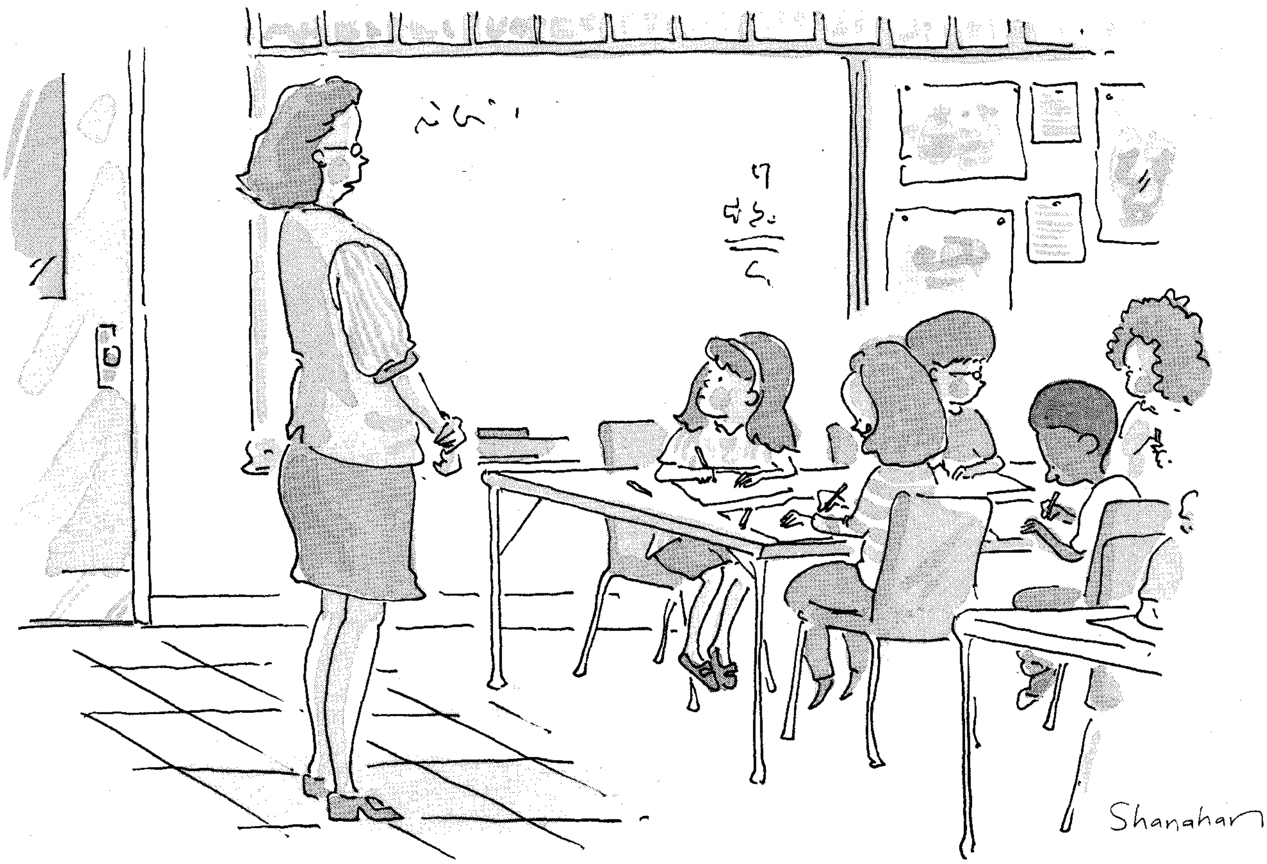
TAKES

RICHARD MERKIN

You haven't lived unless you
have been, in some incarnation
or another, a New York fashion
editor on her first visit to Hollywood.
Frightened faces peer at you from
windows when you ring the doorbell
of a shoppe, and there is no sound
save the hysterical scuffle as
they secrete every sequin and
ostrich plume under the concrete
of the cellar floor. I am not
allowed to see the kind of glittering
nonsense that Hattie Carnegie
shows her favored customers,
because it has been hidden in wells.
When the door is finally opened
and the Head Man comes
forth to greet you, it is with a chip
perilously poised on trembling
shoulders. No question about it,
we of our craft have well-nigh broken
the spirit of the sensitive, creative,
rich, but struggling fashion
designers of California. Kipling
must have foreseen just such
a situation when he wrote about East
being East and West being West.

Unfortunately for my diet, which
prohibits eating words, I was
wearing a belt on my first mission.
A cellophane belt from Paris via
Bonwit Teller, with my name
and address and telephone number
scrawled on it in red enamel.
"That came from Paris, didn't it?"
said the designer (it was
Howard Greer) hollowly. I minced
and said it did. "Now, be fair," said
the embittered man. "If that
had come from Hollywood, who in
New York would have worn it?
And *you* would have gone on record
as saying that it was vulgar, and
dismissed it with sharp cries
of loathing." Well, it *is* vulgar to
have your telephone number resting
on your hipbone. Nobody can deny
that. But I had thought it was
amusing, on account it came from
a place with Prestige. I admitted
all that handsomely, and we were
exchanging lefts as the bell rang.
Hollywood's round.

—Lois Long
On and Off the Avenue,
October 31, 1936



"And if you'd like your art work displayed please include a brief bio."

• •

ing the "Tonight Show," and he wondered if Meyer might consider moving to New York and working as one of his writers. Meyer had been recommended by two other writers, Tom Gammill and Max Pross, who had been a year behind him on the *Lampoon* and had described him to Letterman as "the funniest man in America." (Gammill and Pross later wrote for "Seinfeld," among other shows, and they now write part time for "The Simpsons.") Meyer submitted samples culled from the writing he had done in college, and Letterman was bowled over. "Everything in his submission, down to the last little detail, was so beautifully honed," Letterman told me. "I haven't run across anybody quite like that since." Early in the first season, Meyer came up with a stunt that was the progenitor of many subsequent Letterman routines: squashing things with a steam roller. (Among the items squashed were a watermelon and a "nutritious breakfast.") He also wrote segments in which Letterman would demonstrate a variety of strange gadgets, which were presented as new products but had actually been conceived by Meyer. Those gadgets included a pizza centrifuge, for removing unwanted toppings, and Lotion-in-a-Drawer.

Meyer left Letterman after about two years in order to take a job at "The New Show," Lorne Michaels's much anticipated successor to "Saturday Night Live." (While there, he wrote one of my favorite TV-comedy routines of all time, a John Candy sketch called "Food Repairman.") "The New Show" was cancelled after just two and a half months; Meyer moved first to "Not Necessarily the News," and then to "Saturday Night Live." None of these experiences were entirely satisfying. He liked writing for television but didn't have the same sense of belonging that he had felt at the *Lampoon*. "My stuff wasn't very popular at 'Saturday Night,' " he told me recently. "It was regarded as really fringey, and a lot of times my sketches would get cut. Sometimes they would get cut after dress rehearsal, and I would have the horrible experience of looking out and seeing a painter carefully touching up my set and getting it all ready to be smashed to pieces and sent to a landfill in Brooklyn. It was just a mismatch, although I didn't realize it at the time." He quit in 1987, after two years.

By that point, Meyer was fed up with television and with New York. He moved to Boulder, Colorado, more or less on a whim, and rented a condominium. While living there, he wrote a movie script for Letterman. That project was dropped by Letterman and the studio when Letterman's television show took off, but Meyer's script is still considered a masterpiece by the small group of people who've seen it. A tattered copy had a second life, in the "Simpsons" rewrite room, where for several years the show's other writers would guiltily consult it whenever they were stuck for a joke.

On the side, Meyer published a small, offbeat humor magazine called *Army Man*, whose subtitle was "America's Only Magazine.” Meyer created *Army Man* partly to avoid working on the Letterman script, but in some ways it proved to be the most fulfilling creative project he had ever undertaken. *Army Man* was at the opposite end of the entertainment spectrum from a network television show. The first issue (there would eventually be three) contained eight typed pages and was written almost entirely by him. He laid it out on his bed and printed just two hundred copies, which he gave away to friends.

Despite its modest appearance, *Army Man* attracted a surprisingly broad and loyal following. It made *Rolling Stone's* Hot List in 1989, and for years it circulated in samizdat on college campuses. “The only rule was that the stuff had to be funny and pretty short,” Meyer told me. “To me, the quintessential *Army Man* joke was one of John Swartzwelder's: ‘They can kill the Kennedys. Why can't they make a cup of coffee that tastes good?’ It's a horrifying idea juxtaposed with something really banal—and yet there's a kind of logic to it. It's illuminating because it's kind of how Americans see things: Life's a big jumble, but somehow it leads to something I can consume. I love that.” (Meyer is the only person I know who can deconstruct a joke without killing it.)

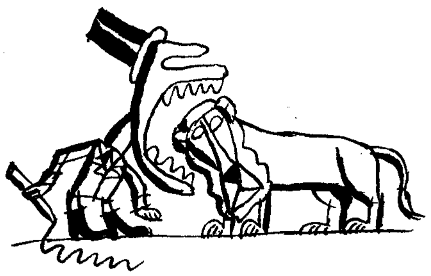
Army Man eventually became a victim of its own success. Meyer was overwhelmed with submissions, and he hated having to reject contributions from friends. He was also approached by would-be investors, who wanted to take *Army Man* national or turn it into a television show. He eventually realized that what to him were the magazine's best features—its small size and its simplicity—were probably doomed.

He also suddenly found himself with much less time on his hands. One of *Army Man's* biggest fans turned out to be Sam Simon, who is one of the three original executive producers of “The Simpsons.” That program was just getting under way when the first issue came out, and Simon, who needed to build a writing staff in a hurry, was captivated. He tracked down Meyer and hired him and several of his contributors, including Swartzwelder and Jon Vitti. “Sam got quite a bit of his staff from the list of credits in *Army Man*,” one of the show's former producers told me. “In a sense, that little magazine was the father of the show.”

“The Simpsons” actually began in 1987, a year before the first issue of *Army Man*, as a series of one-to-two-minute shorts on “The Tracey Ullman Show.” Its creator was the cartoonist Matt Groening, who modelled the original characters on his own family. But “The Simpsons” today probably shares more genetic material with *Army Man* than it does with those shorts, or even with the earliest episodes on Fox.

The show's characters are the key to its appeal. There are now several hundred of them, and the best have come to seem more real, and more complex, than the characters in many live-action programs. Because they are drawings, they can change and grow while remaining frozen in time. Homer still has the same few hairs on his head, but over the years he has evolved from a surly authoritarian into a dreamy dumbbell and surely one of TV's most original and memorable comic creations. Lisa has become ever more wise and precocious—“I don't think real checks have exclamation points,” she tells Homer, who believes that a sweepstakes promotion he has received in the mail is really worth a million dollars—and has developed an inner life that in some ways probably comes closer to Meyer's than does that of any other character on the show. “Marge hasn't changed too much,” Meyer says. “The problem with writing Marge is that you can't have her do stupid or kooky things, because people think that's woman-bashing. And yet you can't make her a totally P.C. superwoman, because it has to be semi-plausible that she loves this man and willingly bore his children. It becomes kind of tragic.”

Most important, Bart has never had to become a creepy adolescent. (If he were portrayed by a live actor, Bart today would be a sophomore in college.) “The challenge with Bart,” Meyer says, “is coming up with literally hundreds of pranks for him to pull that are interesting and wicked but not destructive or easy to imitate. Sometimes we do what we call ‘room jokes,’ which are just for our own amusement, like having Bart say, ‘Wow! Drinking this Drano gave me super powers!’ But the things he does on the show aren't anything like that. For example, in one episode he's just sitting on the living-room floor, singing ‘Jingle Bells’ and hitting little packs of mustard with a hammer. I love that kind of thing. He's just into the rhythm of it, thinking, Oh, good, I've got more packs that I can hit with this hammer. That's really all he's considering—how many are left. The thing I like about Bart is that even though he will put on his grandfather's dentures and bite the ceiling fan and spin around, he is not cruel or nasty.” Bart's character fills out from week to week rather than inexorably drifting further and further from the core of the show.



Meyer and I discussed this topic at great length one Sunday last summer. We had visited the La Brea Tar Pits, where Meyer showed me his favorite exhibit—a glass case containing several hundred petroleum-saturated skulls of dire wolves arrayed on an illuminated orange background—and were drinking coffee nearby. I asked Meyer what he thought of modern television comedies.

“On most shows nowadays,” he said, “almost all the characters are stereotypes, or they embody one basic trait and very little else. And you have shows where all seven characters talk exactly like comedy writers. All the characters seem to be constantly cracking jokes—and, specifically, jokes meant to injure other people. My old girlfriend Maria once said that if anyone ever said to her even one of the things that the people on sitcoms routinely say to each other she would probably burst into tears and go running out of the room.

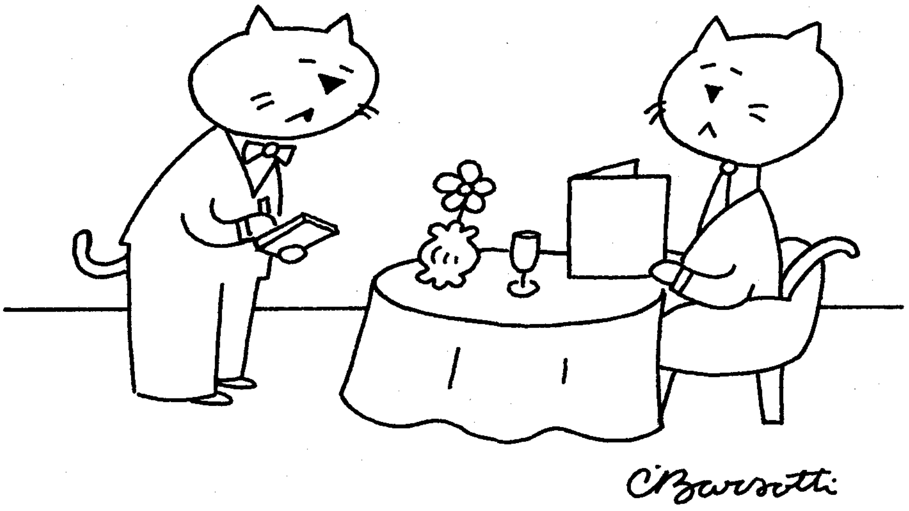
“When you and I were kids, the average TV comedy was about a witch, or a Martian, or a goofy frontier fort, or a comical Nazi prisoner-of-war camp. That was the mainstream. Now the average comedy is about a bunch of people who hang around in some generic urban setting having conversations and sniping at each other. I remember watching, in the sixties, an episode of ‘Get Smart’ in which some angry Indians were aiming a sixty-foot arrow at Washington, and Max said something like 'That's the second-biggest arrow I've ever seen,' and I thought, Oh, great, shows are just going to keep getting nuttier and nuttier. I never dreamed that television comedy would turn in such a dreary direction, so that all you would see is people in living rooms putting each other down."

I asked him why TV comedies changed. "One of the main reasons," he said, "is the tyranny of live studio audiences, which I think have ruined television comedy. 'Leave It to Beaver,' unlike most sitcoms today, was not taped in front of a live audience. If that show were in production now and Beaver made some kind of gentle, sweet remark about his collection of rocks, or whatever, that line wouldn't get a laugh from the audience during rehearsal, and it would be cut. With a live audience, you always end up with hard-edged lines that the audience knows are jokes. Audiences hate it when they have to figure out whether something is funny or not—I think because people have an anxiety about laughing in the wrong place, almost like a fear of speaking in public. That's why the biggest comedy stars tend to be people like Robin Williams and Jim Carrey, because audiences never have to guess when they're trying to be funny. It's the same as the phenomenon of seeing a joke in a movie trailer. A lot of times, a movie's biggest jokes will be in its trailer, so you may see those jokes five or six times before you see the movie. Then you go to the movie itself, and you think, Oh, no, here comes that joke from the trailer—I guess nobody is going to laugh at it, because it's all played out. Wrong. That joke gets the biggest laugh, like a nuclear blast."

Given this insecurity, the creators of "The Simpsons" took an extraordinary risk: they decided not to use a laugh track. On almost all other sitcoms, dialogue was interrupted repeatedly by crescendos of phony guffaws (or by the electronically enhanced laughter of live audiences), creating the unreal ebb and flow of sitcom conversation, in which a typical character's initial reaction to an ostensibly humorous remark could only be to smile archly or look around while waiting for the yucks to die down. On "The Simpsons," funny lines could be topped immediately by other funny lines, and the humor could be layered with great subtlety. In an episode written by Meyer called "Homer the Heretic"—in which Homer skips church on a frigid Sunday morning and then has what he believes to be the best day of his life—Reverend Lovejoy describes the religion of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, who runs the local Kwik-E-Mart, as "miscellaneous." Apu indignantly says, "Hindu! There are seven hundred million of us." Lovejoy smiles at him condescendingly and says, "Aw, that's super"—a quick joke that would have been too delicate to float above superimposed peals of laughter. The success of "The Simpsons" eventually gave more producers the courage to work without a net as well; today, several of the best comedies on TV, among them "King of the Hill" and "Malcolm in the Middle," also have no laugh tracks.

One reason "The Simpsons" has been able to maintain a high level of sophistication in its humor while still appealing to a mass audience may be that the form of the show is one that viewers accept as inherently funny: it's a cartoon. The animation is disarming. "You could never have had Homer as a live-action character, because his actions would seem too horrifying, and too many people would protest," Meyer says. "People still look to TV characters either as role models or as television friends, but they don't usually have those expectations for cartoon characters. Women used to identify with characters played by Mary Tyler Moore, for example, but you don't find a lot of people saying, 'I really want to be like Bugs Bunny.' It gives you some freedom.

"Also, I think we can get away with a little more on 'The Simpsons' because the setup is so traditional. The Simpsons are an intact family unit, which is something you hardly ever see on television anymore. Homer works nine to five, and Marge stays at home, and they have a boy and a girl and a baby, and they live in the standard middle-class house—even though it would seem that they probably couldn't afford that house. Their finances are kind of glossed over in the series. But I think it was a smart choice not to go in any really interesting direction with the core of the show—just to be very traditional, and then make the execution odd and quirky. Because people can take only so much before their heads explode."



"Well, I wouldn't eat any of it."

Meyer caused consternation at "The Simpsons" when, in 1995, he announced that he wasn't going to renew his contract at the end of that season, the show's sixth. He felt burned out by the writing schedule, which, unlike the writing schedules of most television shows, does not include a lengthy summer hiatus. ("There is no time off for anyone, ever," John Swartzwelder told me.) Meyer wanted to try his hand at something that might seem both less draining and more intellectually challenging. He talked at various times about writing a movie, or reviving *Army Man*, or writing a play, or working on a pilot for a television show of his own.

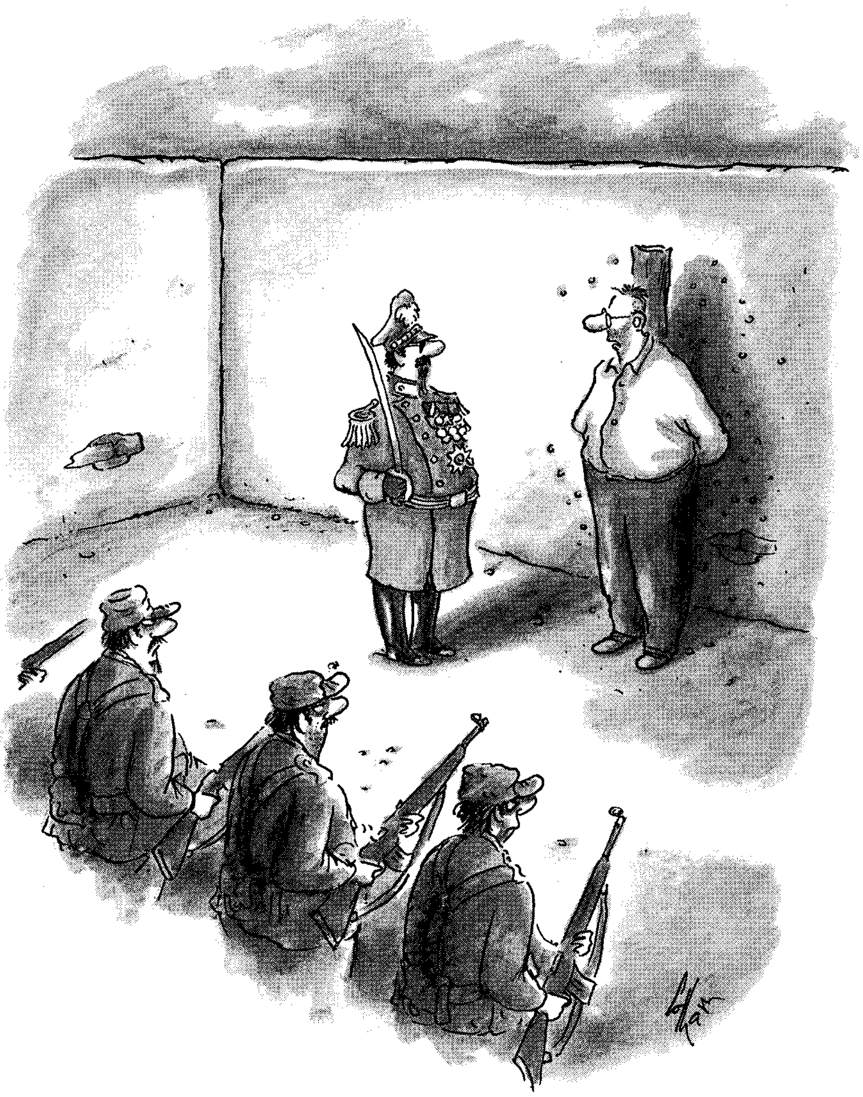
Meyer was also feeling deep personal and emotional pressures. In the early nineties, he underwent a fairly intensive program of psychotherapy, and he says the experience changed his life, although he's not sure how. "Psychotherapy is a very mysterious process, and I think it's poorly understood," he says. "I don't think it's primarily about changing your pattern of behavior, or your perception of what's going on. I think it's about rewiring your brain, and I don't think anyone knows how it works. I went through a very difficult period where I was really in a funk, and then somehow I got through it. Maybe it just outlived its usefulness."

A key moment occurred at Fox one day when Matt Groening invited Meyer to have lunch with him and the artist R. Crumb, whose work Meyer loves. Crumb carries a sketchbook at all times, and he let Meyer look through it. "When I gave it back to him," Meyer says, "I thanked him for letting me see his stuff, and he said, with a really sheepish look on his face, 'My life is an open book.' For some reason, that statement was like a trigger in my mind." Meyer spent an entire session with his psychologist during which he would dissolve into racking sobs every time he tried to say that sentence—a session he believes was the turning point in his therapy. "Up until that moment, I guess, my life had not been an open book, and I hadn't had the courage to risk being myself, or to put myself out there in an unedited way. It was a very powerful experience. Now I can't sob like that, even as a party trick."

Meyer's colleagues at "The Simpsons" would have been much more upset by his impending departure if they had truly believed that he would stay away for good. And, as several had predicted, he returned almost immediately—first as a consultant, then once again as a full-time member of the staff. Breaking free of the show was harder than he had thought it would be, he said later. "But I don't feel ashamed of myself for going back," he says. "Maria always told me not to take the pulpit of 'The Simpsons' lightly, and not to belittle it or trivialize it, and she was right, because I am probably never going to be associated with anything that reaches as many people, even if I work really hard for the rest of my life."

That doesn't mean he necessarily intends to stay with "The Simpsons." Several times over the years, he has pitched ideas for new television comedies. None of those attempts have been successful so far, but he hasn't given up, and he is now working on a new proposal, for a half-hour show called "Bang!" "I'm describing it as 'a fusillade of comedy,' " he says. "It's sort of an animated 'Laugh-In,' but flashier and faster-paced." Meyer thinks of it as a direct descendant of *Army Man*. If his presentation is successful, he will leave "The Simpsons" to work on "Bang!" full time. (Because of the lead time required for animation, the first episode wouldn't appear for a year or two.) Meyer's possible new project has created anxiety at "The Simpsons." Mike Scully told me that he can't imagine putting on the show without Meyer in the rewrite room. Still, Scully says that he doesn't understand why some television network hasn't simply given Meyer a big pile of money and told him to create whatever he wants. "The networks take crazy risks all the time on really bad shows," he says. "Why don't they take a risk on someone really good instead?"

The issue is complicated for Meyer, too. He loves the rewrite room, but he's torn. Several years ago, he told me, "The bad part about a TV job is that you are always wondering if you are a hack. And for good reason. Writing for 'The Simpsons' is fun, but in some ways it's too easy. It's more like a craft. I think it's time for me to do something more personally fulfilling. I start to think, How many really funny years do I have left?" ◆



"*Mind if I turn my hearing aid down?*"

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FICTION

INDIAN COUNTRY

BY SHERMAN ALEXIE

Low Man Smith stepped off the airplane in Missoula, Montana, walked up the humid jetway, and entered the air-conditioned terminal. He was excited that he was about to see her, Carlotta, the Navajo woman who lived on the Flathead Indian Reservation. All during the flight from Seattle, he'd been wondering what he would say first when he saw her, this poet who taught English at the Flathead Indian College, and he had carried on a fierce and exhausting internal debate on the matter. He'd finally decided, just as the plane touched down, to begin his new life with one simple declaration: "Thank you for inviting me."

He practiced those five words in his head—"thank you for inviting me"—and chastised himself for not learning to say them in her language.

He was a Coeur d'Alene Indian, even though his mother was white. He'd been born and raised in Seattle, didn't speak his own tribal language, and had visited his home reservation only six times in his life. His mother had often tried to push him toward the reservation, toward his cousins, aunts, and uncles—all of those who had survived one war or another—but Low Man just wasn't interested, especially after his Coeur d'Alene father died of a heart attack while welding together one of the last great ships in Elliott Bay.

Low Man believed the Coeur d'Alene Reservation to be a monotonous place—a wet kind of monotony that white tourists saw as spiritual and magical. Tourists snapped dozens of photographs and tried to capture it—the wet, spiritual monotony—before they climbed back into their rental cars and drove away to the next reservation on their itineraries.

The tourists didn't know, and would never have guessed, that the reservation's monotony might last for months, sometimes years, before one man would eventually pull a pistol from a secret place and shoot another man in the face, or before a group of women would drag another woman out of her house and beat her left eye clean out of her skull. After that first act of violence, rival families would issue calls for revenge and organize the retaliatory beatings. Later, three or four people would wash the blood from their hands and hide in the hills, causing white men to write editorials that were immediately followed by capture, trial, verdict, and a bus ride to prison. And then, only then, would the long silence, the monotony, resume.

Walking through the Missoula airport, Low Man wondered whether the Flathead Reservation was a dangerous place, whether it was a small country where the king established a new set of laws with every sunrise.

Carrying a suitcase and a computer bag, Low Man searched for Carlotta's face, her round, purple-dark face, in the crowd of people—most of them white men in cowboy hats—who waited at the gate. Instead, he saw an old Indian man holding a hardcover novel above his head.

"I wrote that book," Low Man said to the old man, who stood with most of his weight balanced on his left hip.

"You're him, then," said the old man. "The mystery writer."

"I am, then," said Low Man.

"I'm Carlotta's boss, Raymond. She sent me."

"It's good to meet you, Ray. Where is she?"

"My name is Raymond. And she's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah, gone."

Low Man wondered if "gone" carried a whole different meaning in the state of Montana. Perhaps, under the Big Sky, being gone meant that you were having lunch, or that your car had run out of gas, or that you'd broken your leg in a fly-fishing accident and were stranded in a hospital bed, doped up on painkillers, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the man you loved more than anything else in the world.

"Where, exactly, is gone?" asked Low Man.

The old man's left eye was cloudy with glaucoma. Low Man worried about the quality of Raymond's depth perception.

"She got married yesterday," said the old man. "She and Chuck woke up before sunrise and drove for Flagstaff."

"Flagstaff?" Low Man asked, desperately trying to remember when he had last talked to Carlotta. When? Three days ago, for just a minute, to confirm the details of his imminent arrival.

"Arizona?" Low Man asked.

"Yeah, that's where she and Chuck grew up."

"Who is Chuck?"

"That's her husband," said Raymond. "Obviously."

Low Man needed a drink. He'd been sober for ten years, but he still needed a drink. Not of alcohol, no, but of something. He never worried about falling off the wagon, not anymore. He had spent many nights in hotel rooms where the mini-bars were filled with booze, but had given in only to the temptations of the three-dollar candy bars.

"Ray," said Low Man. "Can we, please, just put a hold on this conversation while I go find me a pop?"

"Carlotta's been sober for six years," said the old man.

"Yes, I know. That's one of the reasons I came here."

"She told me you drank a lot of soda pop. Said it was your substitute addiction."

Shaking his head, Low Man found a snack bar, ordered a large soda, finished it with three swallows, and then ordered another. When he was working on a book, when he was writing, Low Man would drink a six-pack of soda every hour or so; hopped up on the caffeine, he'd pound the keyboard, chapter after chapter, until carpal tunnel syndrome ossified the nerves in his wrists. There it was, the central dilemma of his warrior life: repetitive stress. In his day, Crazy Horse had to worry about Custer and the sociopaths of the Seventh Cavalry.

"O.K.," said Low Man. "Now, tell me, please, Raymond, how long has Carlotta been planning on getting married?"

"Oh, jeez," said Raymond. "She wasn't planning it at all. But Chuck showed up a couple days back—they were honey hearts way back when—and just swept her off her feet. He's been sober for eleven years."

"One more than me."

"Oh, yeah, but I don't think that was the reason she married him."

"No, I imagine not."

"Well, I better get going. I got to pick up my grandchildren from school."

"Ray?"

"It's Raymond."

Low Man wondered what had happened to the Indian men who loved their nicknames. His father had run around with indigenous legends named Bug, Mouse, Stubby, and Stink-Head.

"You're an elder, right?" Low Man asked Raymond.

"Elder than some, not as elder as others."

"Elders know things, right?"

"I know one or two things."

"Then perhaps, just perhaps, you could tell me what, what, what thing I'm supposed to do now?"

Raymond scratched his head and pursed his lips. "Maybe," he said, "you could sign my book for me?"

Distracted, Low Man signed the book, but with his true signature, and not the stylized flourish he'd practiced for years. He signed it "Peace."

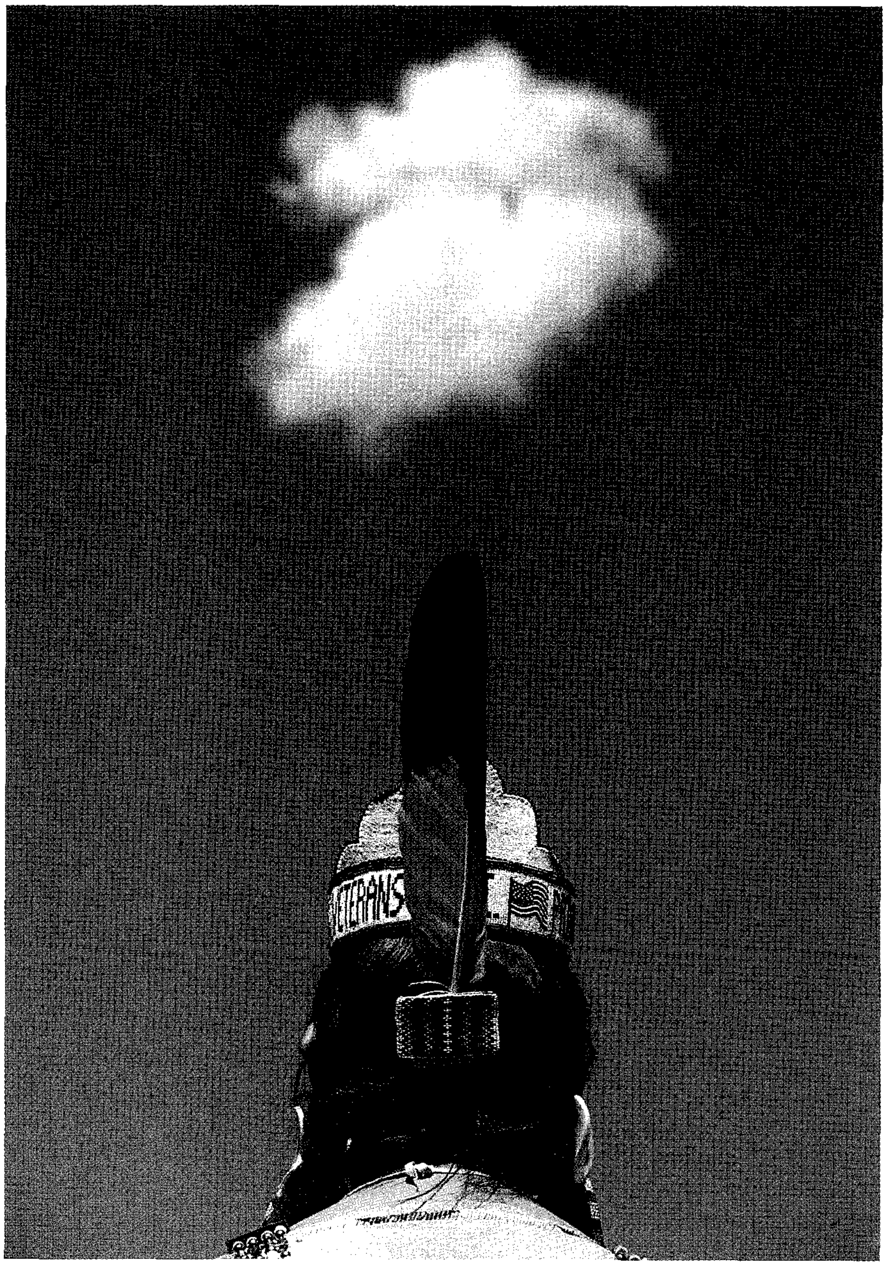
"You're a pretty good writer," Raymond said. "You should keep doing it."

"I'll try," said Low Man as he watched the old Indian shuffle away.

Low Man began to laugh, softly at first, but then with a full-throated roar. He laughed until tears ran down his face, until his stomach cramped, until he retched and threw up in a water fountain. He could not stop laughing, not even after three security officers arrived to escort him out of the airport, and not even after he'd walked three miles into town, and found himself standing in a phone booth outside a 7-Eleven.

"Shit," he said, and suddenly grew serious. "Who am I supposed to call?"

Then he laughed a little more and wondered how he was going to tell this story in the future. He'd change the names of those involved, of course, and invent new personalities and characters—and brand-new desires as well—and then he would be forced to invert and subvert the chronology of events, and the tone of the story would certainly be tailored to fit the audience. Whites and Indians laughed at most of the same jokes, but they laughed for different reasons. Maybe Low Man would turn himself into a blue-collar Indian, a welder who'd quit a good job, who'd quit a loyal wife, to fly to Missoula in pursuit of a crazy white woman. And because he was a mystery writer Low Man would have to throw a dead body into the mix. Whose body? Which weapon?



VOLKER HINZ

Pistol, knife, poison, Low Man thought, as he stood in the phone booth outside the Missoula 7-Eleven.

"Chuck?" he asked the telephone. "Who the fuck is Chuck?"

The telephone didn't answer.

Low Man's last book, "Red Rain," had shipped a hundred and twenty-five thousand copies in hardcover, good enough to flirt with the New York *Times* best-seller list, before falling into the Kingdom of Remainders. He belonged to seven frequent-flier clubs, diligently tossed money into his SEP-I.R.A., and tried to ignore the ulcer just beginning to open a hole in his stomach.

"O.K.," said Low Man as he stood in the telephone booth. "Crazy Horse didn't need Tums. O.K.? Think."

He took a deep breath. He checked the contents of his wallet. He carried two hundred dollars in cash, three credit cards, and a valid driver's license, all the ingredients necessary for renting a car and driving back to Seattle. He doubted he would be let back into the airport. Jesus, he'd always wanted to be the kind of Indian who didn't get kicked out of public places. He played golf, for God's sake.

Opening the phone book, Low Man looked for the local bookstores. He figured a small town like Missoula might have a Waldenbooks or a B. Dalton, but he needed something more intimate and eccentric, even sacred. Low Man prayed for a used-book store, a good one, a musty church filled with bibles written by thousands of disciples. There, in that kind of place, he knew that he could buy somebody's novel or book of poems, then sit down in a comfortable chair to read, and maybe drink a cup of good coffee or a tall glass of the local water.

He found a listing for a bookstore called Bread and Books. Beautiful. He tore the page out of the directory and walked into the 7-Eleven.

"Hey," said Low Man as he slapped the yellow page on the counter. "Where is this place?"

The cashier, a painfully skinny white kid, smiled.

"You tore that out of the phone book, didn't you?"asked the kid.

"Yes, I did," said Low Man.

"You're going to have to pay for that."

"Fine," said Low Man, and set his suitcase on the counter. "I'll trade you this yellow page for everything inside this suitcase. Hell, you can have the suitcase, too, if you tell me where to find this place."

"Bread's?"

A good sign. It was a place popular enough to have a diminutive.

"Yeah, do you read?" asked Low Man.

"Of course."

"What do you read?"

"Comic books."

"What kind of comics?"

"Not comics," said the kid. "Comic books."

"O.K.," said Low Man. "What kind of comic books?"

"Good ones. *Daredevil*, *Preacher*, *Love and Rockets*, *Astro City*."

"Do you read mysteries?"

"You mean, like, murder mysteries?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"No, not really."

"Well, I got a mystery for you anyway," said Low Man as he pushed the suitcase a few inches across the counter. "Guess what's in here?"

"I don't know."

"This is a suitcase," said Low Man.

"I know it's a suitcase."

"I just want you to know," said Low Man as he patted the suitcase. "I just need you to understand that there are only two kinds of suitcase."

"Really?" asked the cashier. He was making six bucks an hour, not enough to be speaking metaphysically with a total stranger, and an Indian stranger at that.

"There is the empty suitcase," said Low Man. "And there is the full suitcase. And what I have here is a full suitcase. And I want to give it to you."

"Mister," said the kid, "you don't have to give me your suitcase. I'll tell you where Bread's is. Hell, Missoula is a small town. You could find it by accident."

"But the thing is, I need you to take me there."

"I'm working."

"I know you're working," said Low Man. "But I figure that shit-bag Camaro out there is yours. So I figure you can close this place down for a few minutes and give me a ride. You give me a ride and I'll give you this suitcase and all of its contents."

"I can't close," said the cashier. "This is a 7-Eleven. We're supposed to be open, like, all the time. Look outside, the sign says twenty-four hours."

"Sweetheart," said Low Man. "I'm older than you, so I remember when 7-Eleven used to be open from seven in the morning until eleven at night. That's why they called it 7-Eleven. Get it? So, why don't you and I get nostalgic, and pretend it's 1973, and close the store long enough for you to drive me to the bookstore?"

"Mister," said the kid, "even if this was 1973, and even if this store was only open from seven to eleven, it would still be three in the afternoon, like it is right now, and I would still not close down."

"Son, son, son," said Low Man, losing his patience. "What if I told you there was a dead body inside this suitcase?"

The cashier blinked, but remained calm.

"That suitcase is too small. You couldn't fit a body in there," said the kid.

"Fair enough," said Low Man. "What if there's just a head?"

"Mister," said the cashier, forced to improvise. "This is Montana. Everybody's got a gun. Including me. And since you aren't from Montana, and I can tell that by looking at you, then you most likely don't have a gun."

"Your point being?"

"I'm going to shoot you in the ass if you don't exit the store immediately."

"Fine," said Low Man. "You can keep the damn bag anyway."

Leaving his suitcase behind, Low Man walked out of the store. He still carried his computer case and the yellow page with Bread and Books's address.

Low Man walked until he stumbled across a Barnes & Noble superstore filling up one corner of an ugly strip mall.

Fucking colonial clipper ships are everywhere, thought Low Man, even in Missoula, Montana. But, secretly, he loved the big green boats, mostly because they sold tons of his books.

Low Man entered the store, found the mystery section, gathered all the copies of his books, soft and hard, and carried them to the information desk.

"I want to sign these," he said to the woman working there.

"Why?"

"Because I wrote them."

"Oh," said the woman, dropping into some highly trained and utterly pleasant demeanor. "Please, let me get the manager. She'll be glad to help you."

"Hold on," said Low Man as he handed her the yellow page. "Do you know where this place is?"

"Bread's?"

There it was again, the nickname. Everybody must go there. At that moment, there could be dozens of people in the bookstore. Low Man wondered if there was a woman, a lovely woman in the bookstore, a lonely woman who would drag him back to her house and make love to him without removing any of her clothes.

"Is it a good store?" asked Low Man.

"I used to work there," she said. "It closed down a month ago. Well, let me get the manager."

"Wait," said Low Man, handing her his computer case. "I found this over in the mystery section."

He'd purchased the computer case through a catalogue, and had regretted it ever since. The bag was bulky, heavy, poorly designed.

"Thank you. I'll put it in Lost and Found."

Low Man's computer was an outdated Apple, its hard drive stuffed to the brim with three unpublished mystery novels and hundreds of programs and applications that he'd never used. Free of his possessions, Low Man waited.

He wondered what Missoula meant, if there'd been some cavalry soldier named Missoula who'd made this part of the world safe for white people. He asked himself if he could kill somebody, an Indian or a white soldier, and what it would feel like. He decided that he would cry when he had to wash blood from his hands. He studied the faces of the white people in the store. He decided to choose the one that he would kill if he were forced to kill. Not the woman with the child, and certainly not the child, but maybe the man reading movie magazines, and, most likely, the old man asleep in the poetry section.

Low Man stared at the gold band on the dead man's left hand. He was still staring when the dead man woke up and walked out of the store.

Low Man had been married twice, to a Lummi woman and a Yakima woman, and had fathered three kids, one each with his ex-wives, the third the result of a one-night stand with a white woman in Santa Fe. He sent money and books to his Indian children, but he hadn't seen his white kid in ten years.

"Mr. Smith, Low Man Smith?" asked the Barnes & Noble manager upon her arrival in Low Man's world. She was blond, blue-eyed, plain.

"Please," he said. "Call me Chuck."

"My name is Erin."

Low Man wondered if he was going to sleep with her, this Erin. He'd spent many nights in hotel rooms with various bookstore employees and literary groupies. That was one of the unpublicized perks of the job. He always wondered what the women saw in him, why they wanted to have sex with a stranger simply based on his ability to create compelling metaphors, or even when he failed to create compelling metaphors. The women were interested in him no matter what the New York *Times Book Review* had to say about his latest novel. Low Man was bored with his own writing, with his books, and, to be honest, he'd grown bored with his literary life and the sexual promiscuity that seemed to go with it. Last year, after meeting Carlotta at the Native American Children of Alcoholics convention in Albuquerque, after sharing a bed with her for five nights, he'd vowed to remain faithful—and had been faithful to her and to the idea of her—even though they'd made no promises, even though she'd talked openly of the three other men who were actively pursuing her, of the one man that she still loved, who had never been named Chuck.

"Mr. Smith, Chuck?" asked Erin, the Barnes & Noble manager. "Are you O.K.?"

"Yes, sorry," said Low Man. "I'm very tired."

"I wish we'd known you were going to be in town," she said. "We would have ordered more copies of your books."

She smiled. Low Man decided that she was the kind of woman who lost sleep so that she could finish reading a good novel. Was he going to wake up before her the next morning and pass the time by scanning the titles of the books stacked on her nightstand?

"I didn't know I was going to be in Missoula," he said. "I was supposed to be spending a week up on the Flathead Reservation."

"Oh, I thought you might be here to see Tracy."

"Who?"

"Tracy," said the manager, and, when that elicited no response from Low Man, she added, "Tracy Moroney. You went to college together, right?"

"She lives here?"

"Actually, she works here."

"Really?"

"Well, she's here part-time while she's getting her M.F.A. at the university."

"She's a writer?"

"Yes. Didn't you know that?"

"I haven't seen Tracy in ten years," said Low Man.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again two uniformed police officers were standing in front of him. One of the officers, who was tall, carried Low Man's suitcase. A shorter officer held a copy of "Red Rain" that had been packed inside.

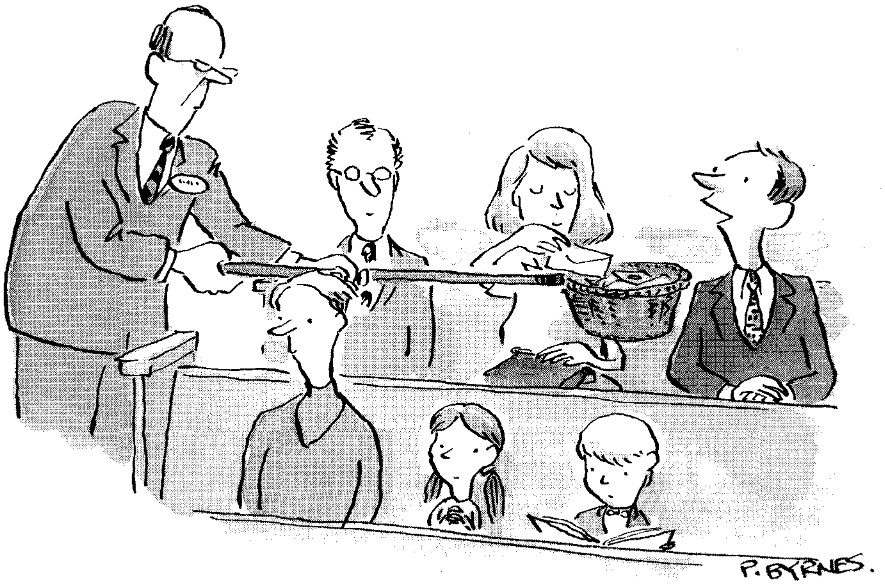
"Mr. Smith," said the tall cop. "Are you Mr. Smith?"

"No, no," said Low Man. "You must be mistaken. My name is Crazy Horse."

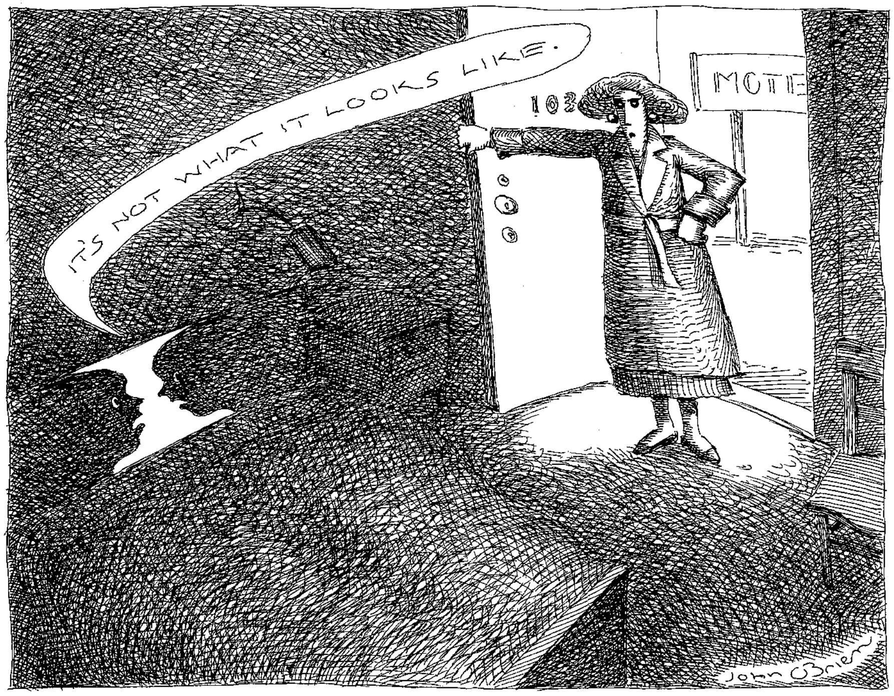
Later, in the police station, Low Man paged through another telephone directory. He hoped that Tracy Moroney's number was listed.

He found her.

"This better be you," she said when



"I was comped."


IT'S NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE.
103
MOTEL
John O'Brien

• •

she answered the phone, clearly expecting somebody else.

"Hi, Tracy, it's Low Man."

"Bah," she said.

"No bah."

"Damn, Low, it's been forever. Are you still an Indian?"

"Yes, I am. Are you still a lesbian?"

"Definitely," she said. "In fact, I thought you were my partner. I'm supposed to pick her up after work. We've got a big date tonight."

"Well, you think maybe you could pick me up, too?"

"Are you in town?" she asked, her voice cracking with excitement. Low Man hoped it was excitement, though he feared it was something else. His chest ached with the memory of her. During college, when he was still drinking, he had once crawled through her apartment window and slept on her living-room floor, though he'd woken before dawn and left before she'd ever known he was there. During the long walk home, he'd veered off the road into a shallow swamp, not because he was too drunk to navigate properly but because he wanted to do something self-flagellating and noble, or at least something that approximated nobility—a drunk twenty-year-old's idea of nobility.

"Damn, Low," she said. "Why didn't you call me before? I would have gone out and bought a dress. I know how much you like me in dresses."

She remembered him so well. He liked that.

"I didn't know I was going to be here," he said. "And I didn't know you lived here."

"So, how'd you get my number?"

"Well, your manager at the bookstore told me you were getting an M.F.A."

"Erin," she said. "I bet you were wondering if she was going to hop on you, right?"

Low Man couldn't answer.

"Damn, Low," she said, laughing loudly. Her laughter had always been loud, impolite, and wonderful. "Erin is a lesbian. You always fall for the lesbians."

Low Man had once kissed Tracy, though they each remembered the kiss differently. She'd thought it was a desperate attempt to change her mind about him in particular, and about men in general, but he'd believed that he'd kissed her only because he wanted to know how it felt, how she smelled and tasted, before he put his feelings into a strongbox and locked them away forever.

"Yeah, that's me," said Low. "The Dyke Mike. Now, can you pick me up?"

"Low, I can't," she said. "I mean, my partner's parents are coming over for dinner. They drove over here from Spokane, and it's the first time I've met them, and they're not exactly happy their daughter has come roaring out of the closet on the motorcycle called Me."

"I really need you to pick me up."

"Low, I want to see you, I do. How about tomorrow? Can't we do this tomorrow? Hell, we'll talk for three days straight, but I really need tonight."

"I'm in jail."

"What did you do?"

"I broke my heart."

"I didn't realize that was illegal."

"Well," he said, "in Missoula it seems to be a misdemeanor."

"Are you arrested?"

"No," said Low. "Not really. The police said they just don't want me to be alone tonight."

"Low, what happened?"

"I came here to see a woman. I was going to ask her to marry me."

"And she said no."

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

"She married Chuck yesterday and moved to Flagstaff."

"I hate Arizona."

She'd always known exactly what to say.

"Low, honey," she added. "I'll be right there."

Tracy Moroney drove a 1972 half-ton Chevrolet pickup. Red with long streaks of gray primer paint. Four good tires and one bad alternator. Hay-bale molding in the bed.

"This truck," said Low as he climbed in. "What stereotype are you trying to maintain?"

"There are no stereotypes in Missoula, Montana," she said, appraising his face and body. "You've gained weight. A lot of weight."

"So have you," he said. "I love all of your chins."

Forty pounds overweight, she was beautiful, wearing a loose T-shirt and tight bluejeans. Her translucent skin bled light into her dark hair.

On the radio, Hank Williams sang white-man blues.

"You're lovely," said Low. "Just lovely."

"Yes, I know," she said. "But don't get your hopes up."

"My hopes have never been up," he said, though he knew he was lying. "Your partner, what's her name?"

"Sara Polatkin," said Tracy. "She's Indian."

"Indian dot-in-the-head or Indian arrow-in-the-heart?"

"She's Spokane. From the rez. Unlike your lame urban Indian ass."

Tracy dropped the truck into gear and drove down a narrow street.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm freaking out her parents. Completely. Not only am I a lesbian but I'm also white."

"The double whammy."

"She's in law school," said Tracy. "She's smart. Even smarter than you."

"Good for you."

"We're getting married."

"Really?"

"Yeah, that's why Sara's parents are coming over. They're going to try to talk her out of it."

"Jesus," said Low Man, wondering why he had bothered to get on the flight from Seattle.

"Jesus has nothing to do with it," said Tracy as she stared ahead and smiled.

Ahead, on the right side of the street, Sara Polatkin was waiting outside a coffee joint. She was short, thin, very pretty, even with bad teeth and eccentric clothes—a black dress with red stockings, and Chuck Taylor basketball shoes with Cat in the Hat socks.

Low Man couldn't look Sara in the eye when she climbed into the truck and sat beside him. He remembered how Crazy Horse—that great Indian warrior, that savior, that Christ figure—was shot in the face by his lover's husband.

Low Man watched as the women leaned over him to kiss each other. He could smell their perfumes.

"So, you're Low," said Sara, her voice inflected with a heavy, singsong reservation accent. She probably had to work hard to keep that accent. Her black hair hung down past her waist.

"It's Low Man, both words, Low Man," he said. Only three people had ever been allowed to call him Low: his mother, his late father, and Tracy.

"O.K., Low Man, both words, Low Man," said Sara. "So, you're the one who is madly in love with my wife."

"I was," he said, careful with the tense. "And she's not your wife, yet."

"Details. Do you still love her?"

Low Man hesitated and Tracy rushed to fill the silence.

"He just got his heart broken by an Indian woman," she said. "I don't think you want to be the second one today, huh, Sara?"

Sara's face went dark, darker.

"Did you ever fuck her?" Sara asked him, and Low Man heard the Spokane River in her voice, and heard the great Columbia as well, and felt the crash of their confluence.

"Sara, let it go," said Tracy, trying to laugh.

"Do they talk like that in law school?" Low Man asked Sara.

"Yeah," she said. "Except it's in Latin."

Low Man could feel the Indian woman's eyes on him, but he didn't return the stare. He watched the road moving ahead of them.

"Sara," said Tracy. "Remember, you're the one who used to sleep with guys."

Tracy put her hand on Low's knee.

"Sorry, Low," she said. "But these born-again dykes can be so righteous."

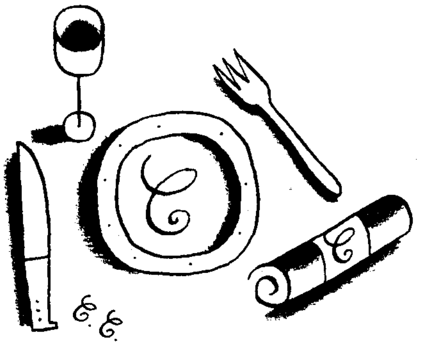
"Yeah, yeah, I'm sorry, Low Man," said Sara. "I'm just nervous about my ma and pa."

At dinner, Low Man sat at the small table between Tracy and Sara. Directly across from him, Sid Polatkin, longtime husband, held the hand of Estelle Polatkin, longtime wife. All five of them had ordered the salmon special, because it had just seemed easier.

"Do you think the salmon will be good?" asked Estelle, her voice thick with a reservation accent, much thicker than her daughter's.

"It's the Holiday Inn," said her husband. He was president of the Spokane Indian Reservation V.F.W. "The Holiday Inn is dependable."

Sid's hair was pulled back in a gray ponytail. So was Estelle's. Both of their faces told stories. Sid's: the recovering alcoholic; the wronged son of a wronged son; the Hamlet of his reservation. Estelle's: the tragic beauty; the woman who stopped drinking because her husband did; the woman who woke in the middle of the night to wash her hands ten times in a row. Now they were Mormons.



The dining room was crowded with an equal mix of redneck ranchers, who'd lived in Montana longer than anyone except the Indians, and liberal expatriates who'd come to fly-fish and write the Great American Novel. Low Man knew there were more than two hundred published writers living in Missoula, and all of them had written at least one Pretty Good American Novel. This was a town stuffed to the brim with cowboy boots and mid-list literary fiction; with white Republicans and even whiter Democrats.

"Mr. Smith, do you believe in God?" Sid had asked Low Man before they sat down.

"Sure," said Low Man, and he had meant it.

"Mr. Smith, do you believe in Jesus?" asked Sid as he unrolled his napkin and set it on his substantial lap.

"What do you mean?" asked Low Man.

"Do you believe that Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead?"

"Come on, Daddy, please," said Sara.

"I think Mr. Smith can speak for himself," said Sid. He leaned across the table and jabbed the air with a sharp index finger.

"Low speaks too much to speak for himself," said Tracy, trying to make a joke, trying to change the subject.

"Mr. Smith," continued Sid. "Why don't you and I pretend we're alone here. Let's pretend this is a country of men."

Low Man smiled and looked at the three women: Estelle, Sara, and Tracy; two strangers and his unrequited love; two Indians and one white. If Low Man was asked, as a man, to rush to their defense, what would he do? If he was asked, as an Indian, to defend Jesus, what could he say?

"I don't think it matters what I think," said Low Man. "I'm not a Christian. Let them have their Jesus."

"Tell me, then," said Sid. "What do you think their Jesus would say about lesbian marriage?"

Tracy and Sara sighed and leaned back in their chairs.

"Mr. Polatkin," said Tracy. "If you want to talk about my relationship with

Sara, then you should talk to me and her. Otherwise, it's just cowardly."

"You think I'm a coward?" asked Sid, tossing his napkin onto the table.

"No," said Estelle, her voice barely rising above a whisper.

"What?" asked Sid. "What did you say?"

"We came here with love," said Estelle. "We came here to forgive."

"Forgive?" asked Tracy. Low Man recognized the anger in Tracy's voice. Low, she'd said to him in anger all those years ago, I'm never going to love you that way. Never. Can you please understand that? I can't change who I am. I don't want to change who I am. And, if you ever touch me again, I swear I will hate you forever.

"Hey, hey, Sid, calm down," said Low Man. "You want to talk Jesus, I'll talk Jesus."

Sid hesitated a moment and then nodded his head.

"That's good," said Low Man. "Now, let me tell you, Jesus was a fag."

Tracy snorted loudly.

"No, no, no," continued Low Man. "Just think about it. I mean, there Jesus was, sticking up for the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled. Who else but a fag would be that liberal, huh? And damn, Jesus hung out with twelve guys wearing great robes and great hair and never, ever talked about women. Tell me, Sidney, what kind of guys never talk about women?"

"Fags!" shouted Tracy.

"This isn't funny," said Sid.

"No, it's not," said Sara, turning to Tracy. "I don't like you this way. You've been different ever since Low showed up."

Low Man wondered if that was true and what it might mean; he wanted it be to be true and he knew exactly what he wanted it to mean. At the other tables, the writers and ranchers had all stopped to eavesdrop. Low Man raised his voice in consideration of his audience.

"So Sid," said Low Man. "Tell me what you do. How do you put the meat in your sandwich?"

"I'm retired," Sid said.

Low Man knew he'd appreciate this talk of occupations. It was how men were supposed to talk to other men.

"And you?" Sid asked.

"I'm a writer."

"You make a living at it?"

"Sid," said Low Man, leaning close to the table. "I make shitloads of money. I make so much money that white people think I'm white."

Nobody laughed at their table, but Low Man heard a snicker from somewhere in the restaurant.

"You're one of the funny Indians, enit?" Sid asked Low Man. "Always making the jokes, never taking it seriously."

"What is this 'it' you're talking about?" asked Low Man.

"Everything. You think everything is funny."

Low Man knew for a fact that everything *was* funny. Homophobia? Funny! Genocide? Hilarious! Political assassination? Sidesplitting! Love? Ha, ha, ha, ha!

"Low, honey," said Tracy. "Maybe you should get some coffee."

Low Man looked at Tracy, at Sara.

"Sid," said Low Man. "How many women have you had in your life?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, counting lovely Estelle here, how many women have you slept with, bedded down, screwed, humped, done the nasty with?"

Estelle gasped and slapped her hand over her mouth—a strangely mannered gesture for a reservation Indian woman.

"I think we made a mistake here," said Sid, rising with his wife.

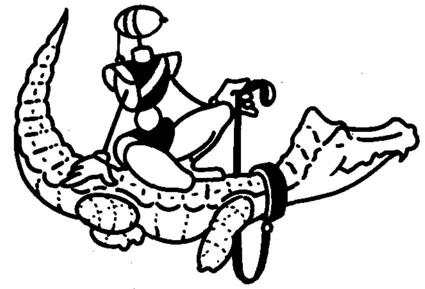
"No, no, no," said Sara. "Please, Mom, Dad, sit down."

Sid and Estelle might have left then, and never returned to their daughter's life, but the waiter arrived with the salmon. White, young, and beautiful, the waiter was terrible at his job. Low Man envied the young man's careless beauty and its possibilities.

"Eat, eat," said Sara. She was starting to cry. She turned to Low Man. "I think you should leave," she said.

Low Man looked at Tracy. He wanted her to choose.

"I think she's right, Low," said Tracy.



"Why don't you take the truck and drive back to our place?"

Low Man stared into her eyes. He stepped through her pupils and searched for some clue to what he was supposed to do.

"Low, go, just go," said Tracy.

"Mom," said Sara, as she held her mother's hand. "Please, stay."

Tracy said, "Sid and Estelle can give us a ride back to our place, right?"

Sid nodded his head. He sliced into his salmon and shoved a huge piece into his mouth.

But Low Man didn't move. Why wasn't he in Seattle? the thought occurred. "Sid," he asked. "I was wondering why you came here. I mean, if you don't approve of this, of them, then why are you here?"

"I love my daughter," said Sid. "And I don't want her to go to Hell."

Sid finished his salmon with two huge bites. He washed it down with water and leaned back in his chair. He stared at Low Man.

"Come on, boys," said Tracy. "No need for the testicle show, O.K.?"

"You have a filthy mouth," Sid said.

"Yeah, I guess I fucking do," she said.

"Whore," Sid said.

Everyone stopped, forks suspended over their plates. The restaurant had grown very quiet.

"Dad, stop it," Sara said, whispering. Her mother lowered her chin onto her chest and wept as if she were thirty years older.

"I raised my daughter to be better than this," said Sid.

"Better than what?" asked Low Man.

"My daughter wasn't, wasn't a gay until she met this, this white woman."

"Maybe I should go, too," said Tracy.

"No," said Sara. "Nobody's going anywhere."

In Sara's voice, Low Man heard something new: an adulthood ceremony taking place between syllables.

"What's wrong with you?" Low Man asked Sid. "She's your daughter."

"I don't think this is any of your business," said Sid. "You're not even supposed to be here."

"I'm not supposed to be anywhere," said Low Man. "But here I am." He smiled. He sounded like a character out of film noir, like Lee Marvin or Humphrey Bogart. Or maybe like Peter Lorre.

"What are you smiling at?" asked Sid.

Low Man wondered what would have happened if he'd had a pistol. Would he have shot Sid Polatkin in the face? No, of course not. But he might have raced out into the dark and tried to bring down one of the airplanes that kept passing over on their way to Arizona.

"Do you know what I want?" Low Man asked Sid.

"No."

"I want to take Tracy out of here. I want to take her back home with me. I want her to fall in love with me."

"Go ahead," said Sid. "And I'll take my daughter back home where she belongs."

Sid then did nothing. His jaw worked furiously. Even at his advanced age, he could have beaten the crap out of Low Man. Both men knew that to be a fact.

Tracy stood up from the table. She took two steps away, then stopped.

"I'm leaving, Sara," she said.

Low Man watched Sara staring at her father and mother. Together, the three of them had buried dozens of loved ones. The three of them knew all of the same mourning songs. Two of them had loved each other enough to conceive the third.

"Mom, Dad," she said. "I love you." And then she, too, stood up and stepped away from the table, away from her mother, her father.

"If you leave now," said Sid, "don't you ever call us. Don't you ever talk to us again."

Low Man remembered the winter when his father fell from the roof of their house and disappeared into a snowbank. He remembered the dreadful silence after the impact, and then the wondrous noise, the joyful cacophony of his father's laughter. He missed his father, but knew that he was supposed to miss him, that fathers were supposed to leave.

"Sid," said Low Man. "These women don't need us. They never did."

Low Man wondered what Crazy Horse was thinking when his friends held his arms, when that soldier pushed the bayonet into his kidney. He wondered if Crazy Horse had still been in love with the woman he sent back to her husband.

"We're leaving," said Tracy and Sara together. Hand in hand, they walked away.

Low Man wanted to rise and follow the women. He wanted Tracy to love him and him alone, or perhaps Tracy and Sara should both fall in love with him, perhaps all three of them could enter into a new kind of marriage. How stupid! How French! How funny! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Low Man sat in his chair and laughed, but Sid, suddenly ferocious, rose and followed his daughter and her lover. He caught them just before they reached the restaurant exit. Then he lost all control. He pushed Tracy into a wall—into the plasterboard—and took his daughter by the elbow.

"You're coming with us," he said.

Estelle reached across the table and touched Low Man's hand. "Help them," she said.

Low Man didn't know which "them" she was talking about. He rushed across the room just as Sid slapped his daughter once, then again. Low Man stepped between them.

"She's my daughter, she's mine," shouted Sid. He pushed against Low Man, as Sara fell back against a glass door, as she turned to hide her face. He was Crazy Horse, Geronimo, Sitting Bull defending his land, tribe, family, sovereignty. She was ashamed of her father, Low Man could see that shame in her face, and he felt the tangible, terrible weight of her shame, the very stink of it.

"She's my daughter, she's my daughter," shouted Sid as he punched Low Man in the chest. Low Man staggered back and fell to one knee, and Sid turned to attack Tracy. But she slapped him hard. Surprised, defeated, Sid dropped to the floor beside Low Man.

The two Indian men sat on the ground as the white woman stood above them. She stared down at them. Low Man wanted her to roll away the stone, arise from the dead, and save him. I'm so ordinary, he thought. He wanted to tell her this, he wanted to confess. I am ordinary, that's all I am, he almost said. But Tracy had already turned and walked away with Sara.

Sid climbed to his feet. He pointed an accusing finger at Low Man, then walked back toward his wife.

"What are you going to do?" Low Man called after him. "What are you going to do when she's gone?" ♦

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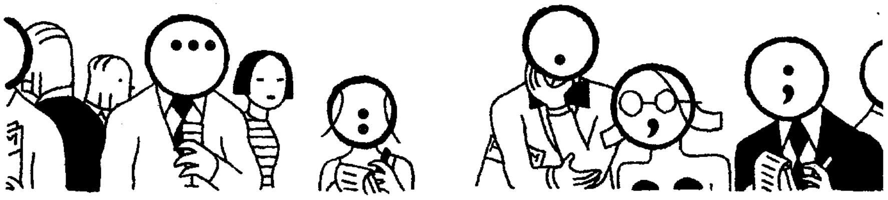


AT THE MUSEUMS

THE EYE OF THE LAND

How Walker Evans reinvented American photography.

BY ANTHONY LANE

The body of a child lies on a pair of thin pillows, which are laid on bare boards. The age, sex, and appearance of the child are uncertain. The trunk and head are covered with a flour sack, leaving one hand and the lower half of each leg exposed. The right foot is heavily bound with bandage; the left has a dark spot the size of a dime which could be either birthmark or sore. Such are the particulars of a photograph taken by Walker Evans in 1936. There is a surge of relief when you finally discover its title: "Squeekie Burroughs Asleep." The moment I read that, I thought of Jairus's daughter in the Gospels—of Jesus entering a house of grief, where keening relatives mourn a child, and consoling them with the words "She is not dead, but sleeping." That cloth over Squeekie is no shroud but a simple guard against flies; by dinnertime, he will be awake. And yet, for all that, the afternoon stillness remains unsettled; there is something about the helpless figure, drifting on his soft white raft in the center of the frame, that whispers a fear of abandonment. He could be not sleeping but dead.

"Squeekie Burroughs Asleep" is a title soothingly appended by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where a Walker Evans retrospective—nearly two hundred images strong—is showing until May 14th. When the picture first appeared, it bore no name at all; you just had to look and pray. It was one of a batch of thirty-one Evans stills, untitled and unadorned, that accompanied almost five hundred pages of prose by James Agee; the book was, of course, "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," their collaborative record of a summer stay among poor tenant farmers in Hale County, Alabama. The photographs stand proud at the head of the book; they do not illustrate so much as distill. They give you all you need and, at the same time, they make you want to know everything else—to get the lowdown on the Burroughs family, on the twin weathering of their faces and lodgings, on the hurt to Squeekie's foot. Calmness in art, from Piero della Francesca through Vermeer and on to Rothko, invariably has this effect: the more restful and reclusive the scene, the more we seek to fill it with our fears.

Interest in Evans has never sagged since his death, in 1975, and the full forces of biography and scholarship have been trained, like fire hoses, on this gratifyingly unknowable man. It is easy to be swept up in the fuss, and, if you are planning to attend the show at the Met, you should certainly go prepared. Evans was literate, difficult, and furtive, and you can hardly hope to scratch the surface of his achievement without steeping yourself in the following: upper-middle-class society in the Midwest at the turn of the century; the early technology of the penny picture and the Kodak folding camera; the development of French symbolism and nineteenth-century realism; the poetry of Hart Crane; Greek Revival architecture in (a) the Eastern states and (b) New Orleans; the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady; the history of the New Deal, with particular reference to the Resettlement Administration set up by the Department of Agriculture; the use of text and typography in modern painting; the life and death of James Agee; the career of Henry Luce, especially the design and editorial practices of *Life* and *Fortune;* the work of Alfred Stieglitz, Robert Frank, and Diane Arbus; the rise and fall of the American left; the American love of advertising; and the American working man. If you also understand the sharecropping system in the cotton industry, and the precise means of operating the tilt device on an eight-by-ten view camera, so much the better.

Just kidding. In fact, the procedure could not be simpler. You walk to the Met, pay your ten dollars, go to the second floor, and look at the photographs. Do not consult the catalogue first; it is lush and helpful, but no reproduction can do justice to the august glow of the prints. All photographs capture light; Evans managed to seal and store it so securely that, like a day remembered as endless, it may never run out. Also, these are small pictures; apart from magazine covers, only one image is more than a foot tall. When you leaf through a book of photographs—or, for that matter, of paintings—they tend to sit snugly within the confines of the page, and you have no true measure of their impact. I remember the shock of entering a gallery of Brueghels at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna; some contained whole armies, surely enough to fill a wall, and yet here were these modest, implacably detailed canvases, a few no bigger than a blotter—great reckonings in a little room.

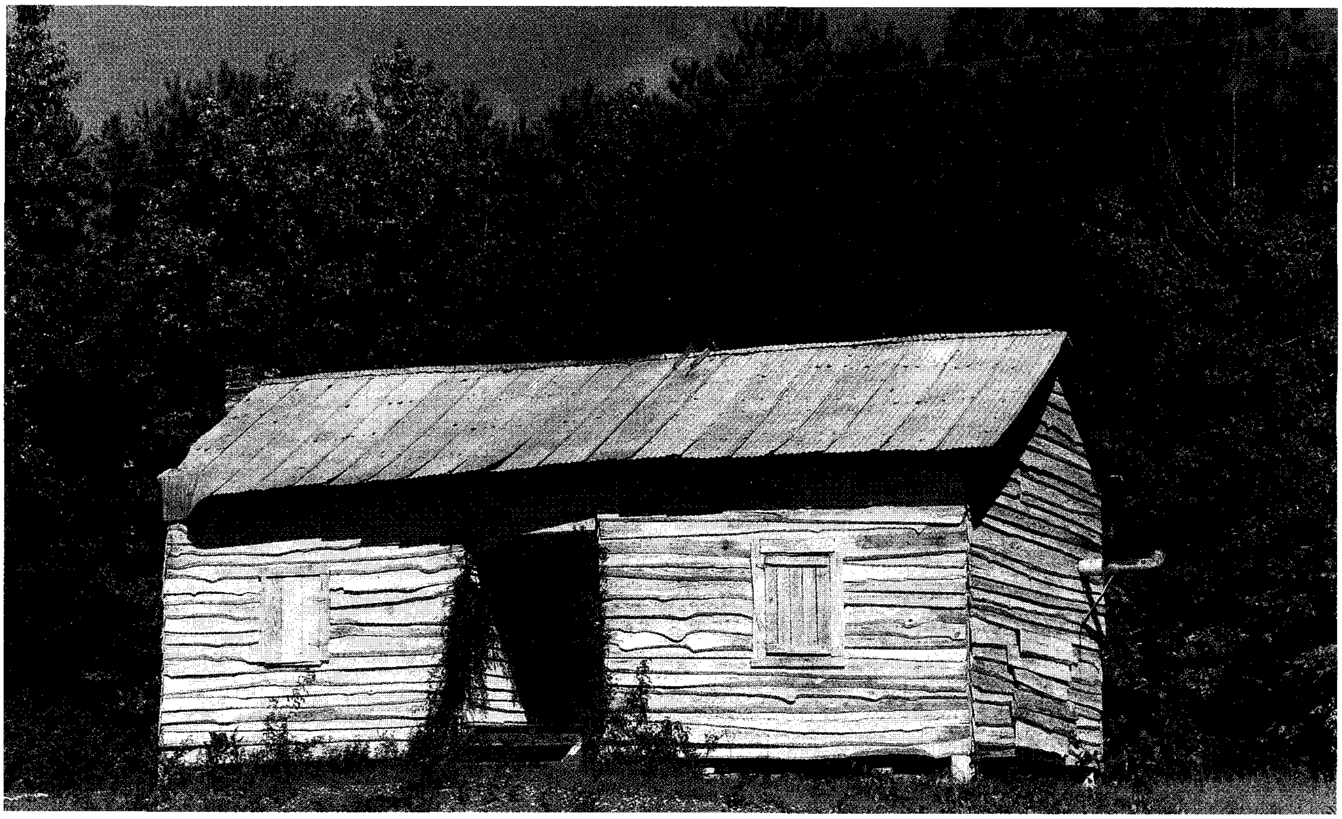
And so it is with Evans. Take "Mississippi Town Negro Quarter, 1936," with its three men biding the hours—hours that stretch away like fields, you sense, from this fraction of a second—outside a barbershop. Look closer, and you find a fourth man: the ghostly white jacket of the barber himself, beyond the dim doorway. By the time you can read the signs for Coke and cigarettes or the sinister help that is offered to the sick ("666 FOR COLDS FEVER"), you will prac-

Opposite: One of the thirty-one untitled Evans photographs published in 1941 in "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men."

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

tically be breathing on the glass. As Evans saw, and as he wanted us to see, there is a world within this frame; and the frame itself is only three and three-eighths inches by five and three-eighths. If the exhibit is a workout for the eyes, it must be hell for the attendants; all along the walls of the Met, there are knots of visitors leaning with suspicious intent, as if they were not on the second floor but stalking the medieval section on the first, peering at a gilded panel to distinguish the sorrowing saints.

The Met makes majestic claims for the show, describing Evans as "among the most influential artists of the twentieth century." This may be true, although there is something in the temperance of his achievement that shrinks at flag-waving and chides our quest for the symbolic. Consider "Joe's Auto Graveyard," taken outside Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1935; some critics read it as an indictment of ecological waste, and I have also seen it analyzed as a deliberate tribute to those who fell at Gettysburg. Neither explanation is implausible, but



we should be careful to note that it is primarily a picture of old cars in a field; Evans spent half a century taking samples of his country, as though of blood or skin, and, if we wish to grow them into an entire culture, that is up to us. His own mantra, like that of so many American artists and writers who pledge to grasp the roughness of the real, was frightening in its modesty: "If the thing is there, why, there it is."

Evans was born in St. Louis in 1903. His father was an advertising executive; a photograph taken in 1900 shows him wooing his bride, Jessie Beach Crane, by means of neatly parted hair, a seducer's wolfish grin, and a guitar. When Evans was about four, the family moved to the swish suburb of Kenilworth, Illinois; the Met exhibit has some snapshots—happy mug shots, mostly—from the end of their time there, including a ten-year-old Walker cocking his head in front of the Stars and Stripes. The Kodak slogan of the time was "You push the button. We do the rest." It could be America talking. In the summer of 1916, Evans photographed a pair of pants hanging on a wall in Hamilton, Montana. Never fond of fancy talk, he labelled it "pair of pants." Twenty years later, the same creased honesty—and the same interest in walls, not to mention the stuff people hang on them—engendered some of the most celebrated images of the century.

The family moved around, and Evans's education was rocky. He attended public school in Toledo, Ohio; boarding school in Connecticut; Mercersburg Academy, in Pennsylvania; and Phillips Academy, in Andover, before landing up at Williams College, where he lasted a whole year. And then, just to be different, the sensitive young American sailed for Paris. The fact that Hemingway, Joyce, Gide, Fitzgerald, and William Carlos Williams were at large there has been ground to a fine dust by hordes of cultural historians; far more entertaining is the fact that the young Evans apparently failed to meet any of the above. (According to his most recent biographer, the late James R. Mellow, Evans was accompanied by his mother. So much for wild youth.) One would like to report that he came of age as a photographer in the City of Light, but it seems that all he did was read. Here are the first indications of his unerring taste; he didn't mess around, going straight for the major players—Baudelaire, Flaubert, Joyce. These are the people you have to read if you wish to develop your ruthlessness—the artistic answer to upper-body strength. It should not be confused with meanness; it entails no more than looking with a clear eye, unclouded by the trace of a tear, and rebuffing all blandishments—the need to please, say, or the cry for change—as you struggle to set down your observations. The beauty is in the beholding, not in the beheld. In short, by the time Walker Evans returned to New York, in 1927, he was ready to become a photographer. Instead, he went to work in a bookstore.

How did this man—to some, the greatest of American photographers—happen upon his art? He didn't plan it; it fulfilled no boyhood dream; he acquired no formal training. "I just caught it, like a disease," he said later. If so, he got it bad; inspect the walls of early work at the Met, and you soon realize that here was a chronic case, terminally gifted from the start. Evans lived down the street from Hart Crane—which, given the poet's incandescently awful behavior, was an act

Above, a cabin in Hale County, Alabama, 1936. Evans spent half a century taking samples of his country, as though of blood or skin. "If the thing is there," he wrote, "why, there it is." At right, a Polaroid snapshot from 1973-74.

of courage in itself—and he was soon invited to supply images for an edition of "The Bridge." Evans delivered a thick black arrowhead of steel, hammered down from the top of the frame, with a small Empire State Building, grayed by distance, jutting in the opposite direction; how could Crane match that?

> Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
> Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.

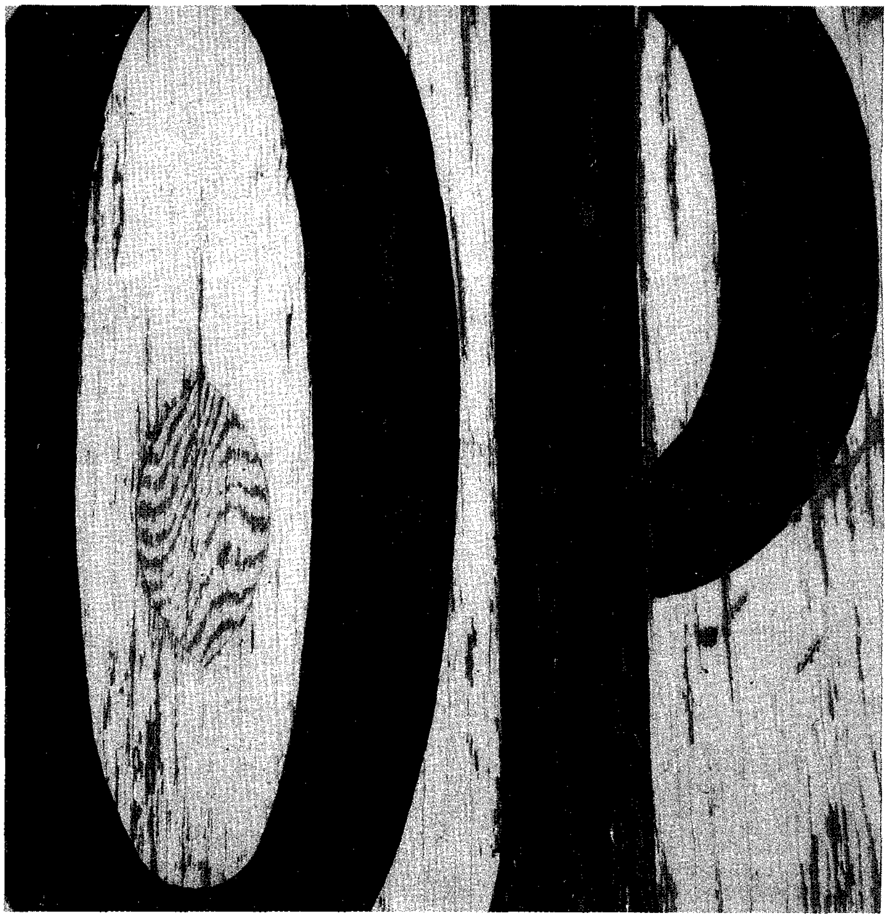
Even now, "thy" is a nasty shock; it's like a hoopskirt in a Jimmy Cagney film. Crane was tuned in to grimy subway talk, and he knew all about the peeling romance of billboards, but he just couldn't bring himself to shake off the courtesies of the Old World—of the way poets, like lovers, were supposed to speak. You could argue that Evans was similarly trapped; after all, the tip of his Brooklyn Bridge is lost in curlicued smoke from the riverboats. Is that not a trace of nineteenth-century fog, lingering like the dreamy climate of an Edward Steichen, or the polite clouds that Evans so deplored in the work of Alfred Stieglitz?

If so, the fog was soon dispelled. To say that it's always fair weather in the world of Walker Evans would be pushing it; think of the rain-slicked diagonals of "Main Street, Saratoga Springs," taken in 1931, with its ranks of hearse-black cars. But there is no doubt that he enjoyed a clear view. America was so various, so engrossingly cluttered, that to leave any nook or dent of it in deliberate obscurity, let alone in an artful mist, was tantamount to a lapse in democratic duty. Evans himself was not of the sunniest disposition, but the light that plays over "Tin Relic, 1930" so flatters a crumpled loop of architectural detail that it is somehow, without mockery, resurrected as a monument. He liked the curiosities, even the indecencies, of vernacular style: neoclassical columns stuck bravely on the faces of shy New Orleans houses, or a wooden awning, punched and scalloped like lace, above a simple stand pump in Maine.

At the start of the nineteen-thirties, Evans travelled to the South Seas with wealthy acquaintances, and to Cuba on assignment. The pictures that he took on his return look freshly sharpened; you sense the zeal of impatience, and maybe a renewed determination to register the physical fallout of the Depression. By now, he was carrying a 35-mm. Leica, sometimes fitting a right-angled viewfinder so that he could catch his subjects unawares; at the same time, he continued to use a heavier, large-format instrument for less fleeting studies. The alternating technique seems true to Evans's nature; he was restless, both in wanderlust and in other varieties of desire—in his sixties, he would sit and recite the names of girls on whom he currently had a crush—yet we honor him today for steadiness of intent. His famous shot of a barbershop in New Orleans, with its vorticist battle of stripes, is softened by the plump stare of the woman at the door; according to Mellow, she is not in the previous exposures—she must have suddenly appeared, although whether she was invited to strike a pose we will never know. Evans effortlessly asks the oldest question of all, the snapper's dilemma: Do you want to cage life, or catch it on the fly?

Evans was so decisively his own man that it's strange to realize how frequently his art belonged to others. His first commissions, in the early and middle nineteen-thirties, came from men like Lincoln Kirstein, his friend and promoter, who wanted records of Victorian architecture; in 1935, he was hired by the Department of the Interior to document a beaten-down mining area of West Virginia. Soon he took up with the Resettlement (later Farm Security) Administration, an agency of the New Deal. His brief broadened; he was sent South, "to execute photographic work for informational and publicity purposes." He performed his task conscientiously, as he did when compiling color portfolios for *Fortune*, in the nineteen-fifties; yet there is scarcely a single instant in the entire Met show when Walker Evans can be accused of executing photographic work for the purposes of anyone but Walker Evans.

This is true even of "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men." The book has had a curious critical ride. It met with indifference when it appeared, in 1941, but came of age in the sixties, when its anthem to doomed workers struck a chord with the civil-rights movement. Agee toiled for four years on his prose, and you wish he hadn't. These days, the only parts that stay with you are his sturdy, delicate inventories of the sharecroppers' worldly goods: "A cracked roseflowered



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china shaving mug, broken along the edge. . . A pink crescent celluloid comb: twenty-seven teeth, of which three are missing." It could be a forensics report from a crime scene, and, from the point of view of Agee, a card-carrying Communist, that was pretty much what it was. His torrid idealizing of manual labor, matched only by a guilt-scarred fretting over the intrusiveness of his presence, makes him sound like a more clotted version of Levin in "Anna Karenina," cutting hay with peasants whom he will never resemble; the irony is that Agee's mission succeeds only when it starts to approach the condition of a Walker Evans photograph. I would swap all his swooning evocations of "the tragic land" for one shot of a local cabin—the crisp white wood of its walls, layered like geological strata, shining against the forest of foliage and the storm-dark backing of the sky.

From here, the irony deepens and spreads. The most persuasive visual renderings of the Depression were, it turns out, made by a man who, in 1935, wrote a memo to himself that declared, "NO POLITICS whatever." This means not that Evans the voter had no views but that he would under no circumstances allow them to color the monochrome precision of his prints. He himself was of a liberal cast, although, by the standard of his more fiery friends, he cut a conservative figure in his English tweeds and shoes. My favorite Evans anecdote concerns a trip to Georgia that he made with a friend named Gifford Cochran in 1935; if the 35-mm. shots of roadside life seem a little blurred, that may be because Cochran's butler, James, was driving too fast. In one frame, the hood ornament in the foreground pokes at the black family walking by. Such condescension would be laughable were it not for the nagging fact that the photographs of the Savannah docks, where James chauffeured Evans one afternoon, are as witty and respectful as you could wish for. It's the old Flaubert trick: compassion, like contempt, is all very well, but feelings cannot begin to warm up until the cold eye has done its duty. Although Evans pursued what he called "the art of seeing,"at some indefinable point the art shades into morality: don't look up at people, and don't look down on them, either; just give them your level gaze.

That's why the most affecting pictures in the show come at you head on. When Evans points his lens skyward at a statue, it strikes a false note; when he sets up directly opposite a fruit store, or a movie poster, or one of those squat, heroic little churches which he sought and loved, his scrupulous record feels like a matter of honor. One of the advantages of a large-format camera, for all its bulk, is that the final image can be a contact print—the negative laid straight on the paper, with no enlargement to degrade the clarity. You might expect head-on shots to lack the dimension of depth, but it is there in the microscopic play of texture; consult the great Alabama townscapes of 1935-36, and you find yourself following every ridge and wrinkle in the tin façade of a contractor's store in Moundville, and thrilling to the angled sunlight that knifes in from the side of a Selma street. If you think you recognize that angle, you're right. The first Evans show—"Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses"—staged by Lincoln Kirstein, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933, ran alongside an Edward Hopper exhibit. From this distance, the kinship looks intense; the Selma photograph is no homage, but the shadows (and the ominous silence) are as clean-cut as those of Hopper's "Early Sunday Morning." Is it early morning in the Evans, too? Or is the day winding down in disappointment?

The most disquieting thing about the Met show is that, as it proceeds, you find yourself wondering just how interested Walker Evans was in people. The biographies present a dedicated, often unsympathetic figure. "I play tennis and drink iced tea in grateful seclusion," he wrote from Florida in 1934. If you want evidence of his casual anti-Semitism (Ralph Steiner, who gave him photography lessons, was "a bitter little Jew"), or of his even more startling misogyny, it is not hard to find. On the other hand, the

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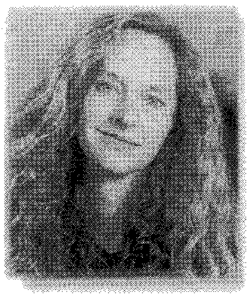

THE PLEASING HOUR

by Lily King

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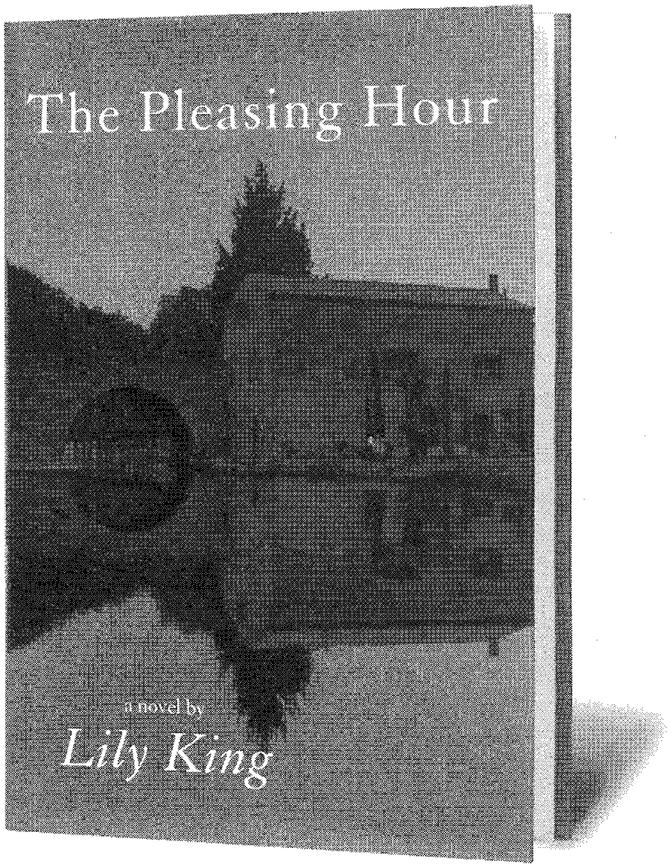

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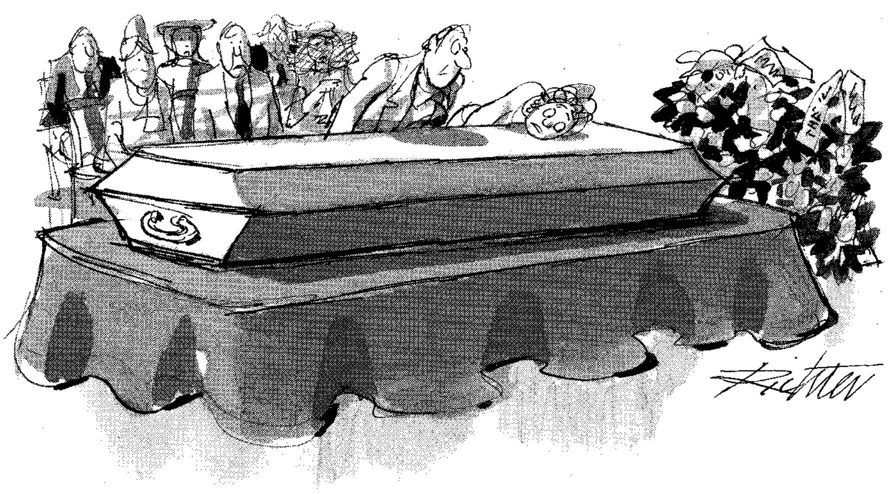

"It must be his beeper."

list of things he held in contempt, typed out in 1937, begins with "men who try to fascinate women with their minds."

Evans married twice, and divorced twice, and strung women along; he was involved with Agee's sister, and then with Agee's first wife, and then, for good measure, he got into a threesome with Agee and his second wife. But the sense of try-anything boredom is more pressing than that of passion; his brio is reserved for his camera, and what matters is how insistently—and, if one is honest, how fruitfully—such diffidence leaks into the work. He was not a humanist like Henri Cartier-Bresson, or a sentimentalist like Robert Doisneau, and he lacks the nostalgic *douceur* of Eugène Atget, whom he much admired; Evans was a classicist, and, as such, he forced himself to acknowledge that the human spirit, like the bodies and rooms that house it, is stamped and flattened by the imprint of time. The way to trace the fortunes of the American people, as far as he could see, was to ponder the places where they had come and gone.

In 1938, Evans began to photograph what he called "the crashing non-euphoria of New York subway life." He would hide his Contax under his coat, with the lens peeking between two buttons, and shoot his unwitting subjects across the car. The results, collected under the title "Many Are Called," had to wait a quarter of a century before they saw the light of day, in a MOMA exhibit—as if the souls enshrined by the camera were permanent residents, and had spent the intervening years in the dirty tunnels. There is a wondrous range of expression here, including an array of the expressionless—city dwellers, alone even when they squash together, weary to their bones. Evans labelled himself "a penitent spy" and "an apologetic voyeur," and "Many Are Called" will grip the psychologist and the sociologist alike; but although the pictures hit hard, the bruises fade with surprising speed. By Evans's own illimitable standards, the character study is never quite enough; even in the Alabama portrait of Floyd Burroughs, Squeekie's father, what one remembers is not just the look in the farmer's eyes but the fraying on the shoulder of his shirt. He is clothed in his own story, and, when the details start to smudge, as they do in the fug of the subway shots, the fullness of life drops away.

By 1940, whether he liked it or not, the master of incognito had become a public figure. "American Photographs," a major one-man exhibit, had shown at MOMA in 1938 to high acclaim. He had the first of two Guggenheim fellowships. By the mid-forties, he was on the staff of *Fortune*, where he later rejoiced in the title of Special Photographic Editor and made himself unpopular. All this might suggest a slackening of effort, or a dimming in the eye; such is the traditional price to pay when the loafing outsider is beckoned into the fold. But, as Mia Fineman points out in an instructive essay for the Met catalogue, "Evans spent most of his professional life lingering just inside the gates of the Establishment." It was a smart place to hang out; you got paid, but nobody would notice if you vanished for a while, and, like a court painter under the Medicis, Evans—the prickly artist as smooth operator—used someone else's money and space to air his lustrous obsessions. He began to shoot in color, but he made sure that it was nothing to shout about. "If you tone it all down," he said, "it's just about bearable." He also designed layouts and supplied short texts, offering further evidence of a lightly saddened wit:

> The methodical, almost loving destruction of a building seems to answer a deep human need that is surely akin to humor, to impudence, and to the balm of irreverence. Hence the rapt sidewalk attendance at spectacles of demolition. Who has not cheered the loosening of a dignified old cornice? Or glowed inwardly over the nicely calculated fall of a really solid brick wall?

That comes from 1951, when Evans was not yet fifty; he had the knack of appearing, or sounding, slightly older than he was. This was no deceit; his sympathy with the wrecking crew and his heartsick reveries on railroad trips across the American plains—where "the country is in semi-undress" and the traveller slides past "the classic barns and the battalions of cabbages"—tell of a genuine addiction to the fading and the failed. Evans hoarded stuff as a dragon gathers jewels into its lair; by the end of his life, he owned nine thousand picture postcards, and, according to his friend the artist William Christenberry, he would steal traffic signs with a tool kit and a can of Liquid Wrench. The Met has some of his junk—stolen goods or otherwise—mounted on a wall, plus some extraordinary Polaroids, taken when Evans was too infirm to handle a bigger camera. It is as though the manic compulsion to register experience—even in rusty scraps, the body parts of a civilization—had become the only surefire way to know that he was still living it. To the end, Evans gave it his best shot.

There is a simple Polaroid from 1973 or a year later. Again, the color is kept to a minimum—charcoal, dull brown, and cream. It shows a sign saying "OP," with a whorl in the wood as neat as a thumbprint. Evans, the sharpest cropper in the history of the medium, was up to his old tricks. As long ago as 1929, he had printed a tight, scumbled closeup of a roadside gas sign, with the scrawled word "Gas" and a large capital "A." It probably stood for "Air," but you never knew, and so it is with OP: STOP? OPEN? SHOP? We can be fairly sure that it is not a segment of POP ART; art historians may try to recruit Evans to the cause, but he lacks the gaudy graphic explosiveness of a Lichtenstein or a Rosenquist, and his lettering is just too found, too stumbled-over, for the heavily worked numbers and targets of Jasper Johns. At most, Evans embarks on a kind of narrative tease, challenging us to guess what happens next—what lies over the threshold of the frame. "Paul Klee would have jumped out of his shoes had he come upon the green door below," he wrote of one of his color prints in *Architectural Forum*, and there are times when Evans's slow amassing of American things, whether on film or in his own overburdened kitchen, comes close to Klee's secret bestiary of doodles and directives.

Yet Evans the artist was not a keeper of secrets; as a private citizen, he remains self-guarding, but his work fans out into shared pleasures. His pictures are never in-jokes—never belittled by the amusing, look-at-this charm that is so lethal to photography. The crystalline rightness of his compositions makes you think not of days sweated out in the darkroom, let alone under studio lights, but of a guy going out on the road, like a hunter or a salesman, and gazing at places until they bequeath the beauty of their natural form—as if it were hidden there already, and needed only patience to flush it out. An Ansel Adams print leaves you wary of daring to take another photograph ever again, for fear of falling short; it would be like trying to cut your own diamonds. A Walker Evans, on the other hand, makes you want to grab your scabby old Olympus and head for the streets. It's not that you can do better—you would be lucky, in fact, to do a hundred times worse—but your eyes have been rinsed and descaled. The world out there suddenly feels like a movie show, and you don't want to miss it. "Stare," said Evans. "Pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long." ◆

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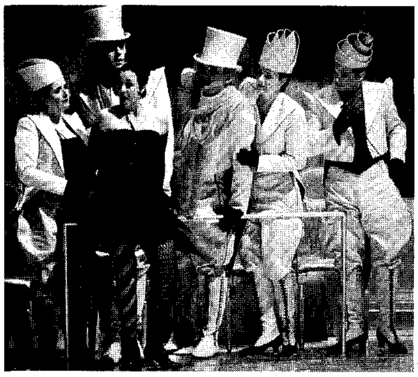
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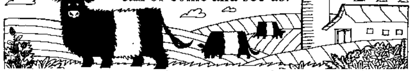
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SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

In New Orleans, the past isn't history.

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

Not long ago, the proper attitude to have about the South was the tortured, obsessively insistent one expressed by Quentin Compson in the last line of "Absalom, Absalom!": "*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" But now everybody loves the South. I'm constantly running into people who have just come back from a visit to New Orleans, my home town, and had such a good time that they're thinking about getting an apartment and spending part of the year down there. New Orleans has established itself as America's favorite place to hold a convention—local color, great food—while at the same time it has steadily moved up to join the front rank (also occupied by Detroit and Washington, D.C.) of America's most screwed-up big cities. It is always right at the top in poverty and violent crime, and right at the bottom in economic growth and school quality. Behind the celebration of its charms lurks the issue of how it can be doing so badly in booming, improving America.

New Orleans was always well aware of the Quentin Compson problem, but it had a solution at hand. It would embrace the more attractive aspects of the South, by being relaxed and gracious and appreciative of life's pleasures, while avoiding the South's traditional backwardness and intolerance, by promoting its un-Southern virtues of urbanity, sophistication, and ethnic diversity. Now, as a sign of New Orleans' current glorification, we have three new books about the city, each set in a different spot in its history. Taken together, they raise the question of whether New Orleans really has developed a cultural Third Way, or whether—the less joyous possibility—it's merely premodern.

One of the many odd, poky corners of New Orleans is the Chalmette Battlefield, the site of the Battle of New Orleans, on January 8, 1815. You drive out past the French Quarter, downstream along the Mississippi River, through a procession of middle-class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods with an increasingly rural feeling, and finally you come to a long, narrow open field that sits between the road and the Mississippi River levee. It's a minor tourist attraction, featuring a mansion built a few years after the battle, a modest stone obelisk, a visitor center with cheesy dioramas, and a vacant expanse of grass where the battle took place. It has none of the sacred aura that permeates the great Civil War battlefields. Most of the time, it's pleasantly deserted.

The difficulty with the Battle of New Orleans, as far as its qualifying as a treasured national event, is that it took place after the war it was part of had ended (the War of 1812, which is pretty hazy in most people's memories anyway). Though the Americans and the British signed the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814, word didn't reach New Orleans until March 13th. Still, Robert Remini, the author of the standard, three-volume biography of Andrew Jackson, has made an all-out effort to win a place for the Battle of New Orleans in popular military-historical memory. His short new book, "The Battle of New Orleans: Andrew Jackson and America's First Military Victory" (Viking; $24.95), is meant to be a rousing, celebratory war yarn, delivered in simple dramatic prose, in the mode of the recent run of books about D Day by Stephen Ambrose (an emeritus professor at the University of New Orleans, who provided a blurb for the jacket).

The Battle of New Orleans does make for an interesting story. In late November, 1814, British troops, who, on the strength of their performance in the Napoleonic wars, were considered the best in the world, sailed into the Gulf of Mexico from Jamaica, expecting to conquer New Orleans almost effortlessly. The defenders of the city were a bunch of untrained frontier militiamen under the command of General Andrew Jackson, whose main experience was in Indian fighting. The overconfident British suffered one of the swiftest and most lopsided defeats in military history. In broad daylight, their commander, Lieutenant General Sir Edward Michael Pakenham, marched his column—"flags and standards fluttering in the slight breeze, rockets blazing as they whooshed into the sky, drums beating in unison, bugles blaring their call to advance, and men in the rear holding heavy fascines and unwieldy ladders"—directly across the exposed field you see in Chalmette and into a fortified American line. Less than half an hour later, two-thirds of the British force of three thousand had been killed or wounded. Pakenham himself died of a gunshot wound. The number of American casualties in the battle was perhaps as low as thirteen.

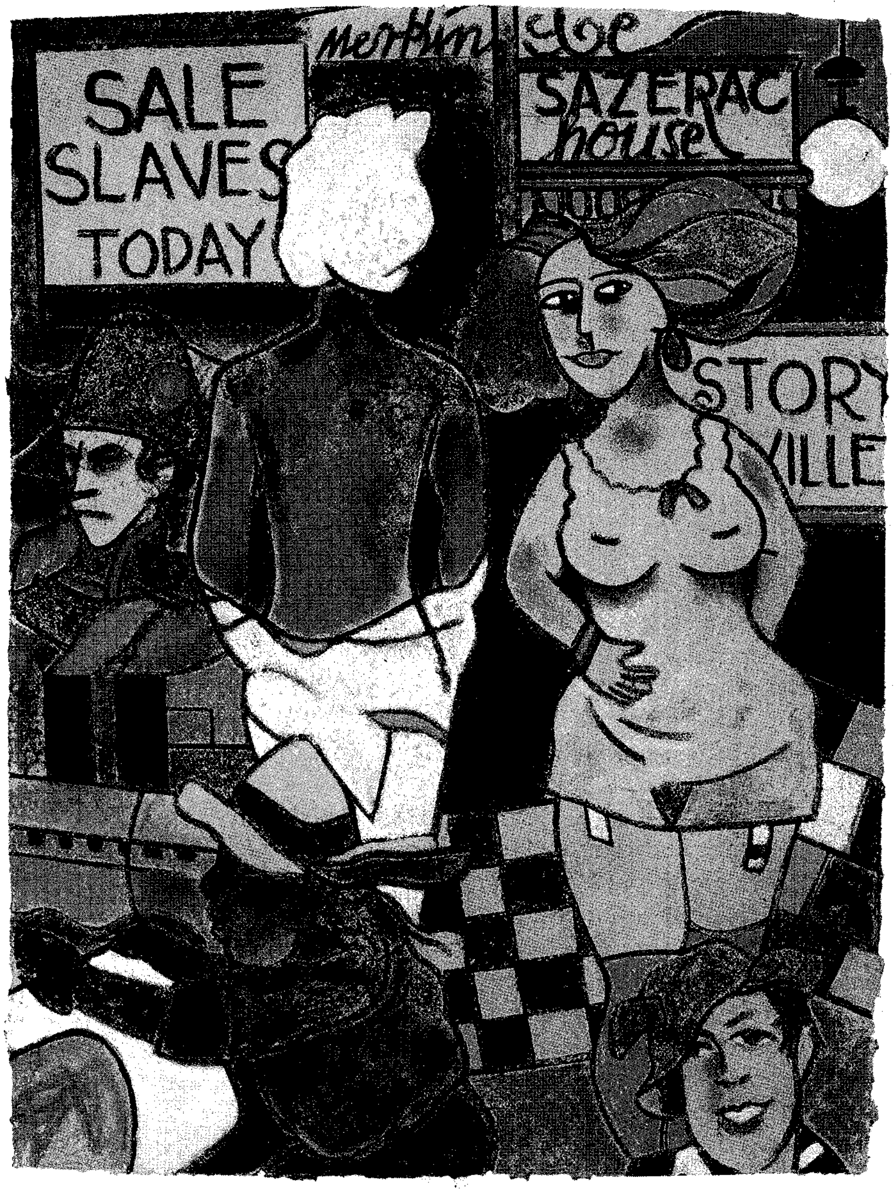
The defeat of the British Army was largely the result of its deliberateness. Its soldiers had landed outside New Orleans a full month before the battle and elaborately set up a position by dragging matériel through the swamps. If they had swept right along, lightly provisioned, they might have taken New Orleans; as it was, they gave Jackson plenty of time to prepare, and he always chose the aggressive course while his adversaries were choosing the cautious one. That the battle took place outside New Orleans instead of in it is testament to Jackson's daring in moving his men forward to a point fairly near the British encampment. Apparently, the British believed that New Orleans would fold as soon as their presence became known. It was, after all, a polyglot city, uninvolved in the American Revolution, and had been part of the United States for barely a decade; its residents seemed unlikely to resist with the fierceness of a people protecting their homeland. New Orleanians knew that the British had recently burned the United States Capitol Building and the White House. The governor of Louisiana, under prodding from Jackson, actually dismissed the state legislature and locked the state capitol, lest the members gather and sue for peace, and Jackson probably wouldn't have won had he not forged a strategic alliance with the pirate Jean Laffite, who was far more interested in resisting the British than the local officials seem to have been.

Remini insists on reading the American victory as a parable: we won because Jackson employed a prototype of Jacksonian democracy. This takes the author out of the realm of history and into mythmaking. In the melting pot of war, Remini writes, the citizens of New Orleans realized that "they were Americans, no matter their ethnic background, social class, or residence." And therefore:

> From this moment on, Americans also believed wholeheartedly in the superiority of American institutions such as representative government, and that they had created a society which rewarded talent and individual initiative instead of class and blood lines. They also believed that this kind of society would ultimately spread around the globe and that its institutions would lift people out of their subjugation to kings and emperors and czars. Such a conceit was possible because the united efforts of a free people, when challenged on the battlefield, had pulverized the pretensions of an ambitious, class-dominated, and arrogant empire.

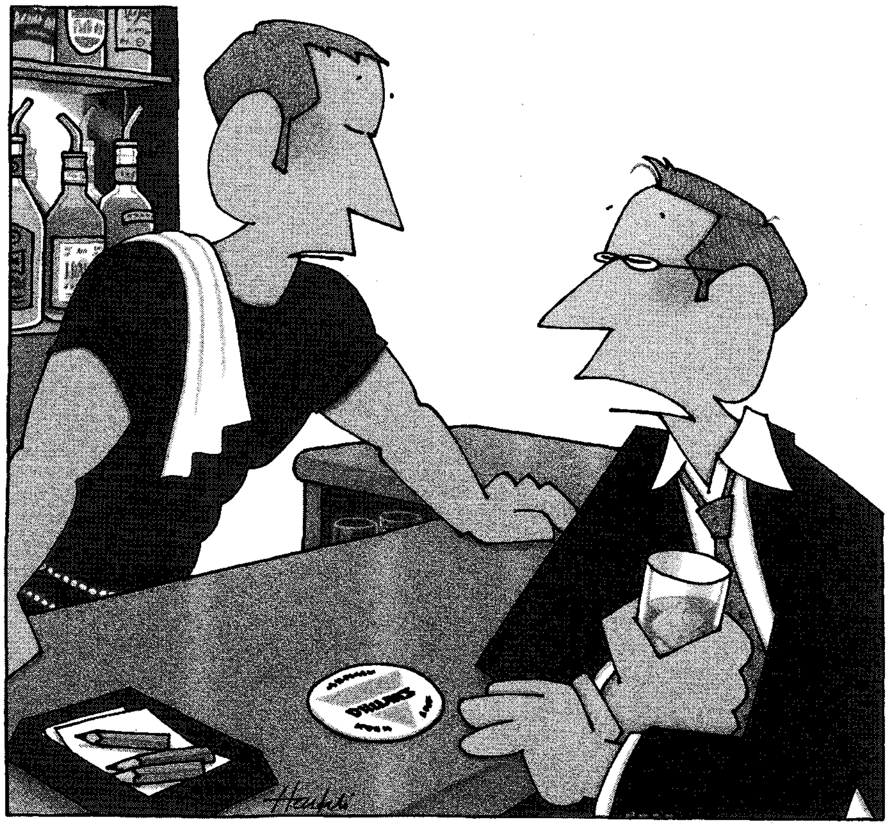
A more plausible claim for the importance of the Battle of New Orleans would be that it established Andrew Jackson as a national hero. This was a necessary precondition to his being elected President, in 1828, making him the first man of common birth to hold the office. There is also a good case to be made that the battle, more than the Treaty of Ghent, persuaded the European powers that the United States was here to stay. As Remini observes, we have never again been invaded by foreigners. But it's more than a little wishful to represent Jackson's victory as a triumph for liberal multiculturalism. A forceful reminder that life in the Crescent City after the battle wasn't all toleration is Walter Johnson's "Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market" (Harvard; $26). In the period following the Battle of New Orleans, the city was home to the largest slave market on the North American continent. The market became a major institution after the closing off of the African slave trade, in 1808; reached its commercial peak during Jackson's Presidency; and finally, on January 1, 1864, many thousands of sales later, had all its signs stripped down by occupying Union troops.

Slavery might be the most complicated subject in American historical writing. One of the difficulties is that a good portion of the primary-source material was compiled by interested parties who were pushing a political cause, such as abolitionists. America's racial controversies extend so far into the past that it's difficult to find any information about slavery which is completely free of them, and so far forward into the present that there has never been a historical work on slavery which couldn't be taken as a comment on the contemporary situation. Walter Johnson has some new material at his disposal: a large body of legal documents pertaining to the slave market, including acts of sale and litigation records. It turns out that slaves did, in fact, dread being "sold down the river," which meant being marched in chains from the upper South to the New Orleans market and thence dispatched to one of the sugar-cane plantations just above the city, where conditions were especially harsh. (Robert Remini reports that the governor of Louisiana exempted sugar planters from service in the Battle of New Orleans, because the black-white ratio on the plantations was twenty-five to one and the social order was considered fragile.) New Orleans was home to slavery at its most com-



The city's easy allure comes with a legacy of flophouses, cathouses, and slave quarters.

RICHARD MERKIN



"My boyfriend is the son my parents always wanted."

• •

mercial and, after the sale, its most cruel.

The subtitle of Johnson's elegant and intelligent book seems to promise us a virtual-reality journey into the New Orleans slave market itself—a collection of a dozen or two buildings down at the lower end of the French Quarter, each of them part flophouse (for the traders), part prison (for the slaves), part stable (for the traders' horses), and part open-air retail space. But this is really a book about a theme, human commerce, not a place. Johnson has more at his disposal than new records. He also has new intellectual tools; he partakes deeply of the last couple of decades' worth of theoretical advances in cultural history. Still, the book lacks forward propulsion, because Johnson is stuck with having to organize it without the benefit of a story line: it is, inevitably, a collection of examples drawn from the lives of people who didn't know each other, and tied together with interpretive passages. These passages occasionally err on the side of making things more complicated than they probably were. Through most of history, after all, people have taken the opportunity, when available, to own other people and make them perform especially difficult or distasteful tasks for free. Here is Johnson's gloss on a woman named Miriam Hilliard, who, he conjectures, wanted her husband to buy a slave in order to relieve her of having to get up during the night to attend to their squalling newborn baby:

> As useful as the patriarchal provision script was in describing slave sales in a way that knit together the authority of white men over both the political economy and the household economy, it could not fully contain the possibilities that a white woman like Miriam Hilliard might discern in the slave market—possibilities that might be subversive of domestic patriarchy, if not of slavery itself.

The sort of history that parses slavery in such a minutely textured way is a phenomenon of the last thirty years or so. Slavery used to be fairly straightforward. Historical writing on slavery during the first half of the twentieth century was done mostly by Southern scholars who presented it as relatively benign. Then the Northern liberals swooped in and made slavery even more nightmarish than it had been in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The liberal school had a surprisingly short run, though, lasting roughly from the publication of Kenneth Stampp's "The Peculiar Institution," in 1956, to that of Stanley Elkins's "Slavery," in 1959. The trouble was that the liberals kept upping the level of slavery's physical and psychological brutalization until the slaves began to come off as passive victims. Just at the moment that the Black Power movement was parting company with civil-rights liberals whom it found patronizing, a new generation of historians of slavery was undertaking to give slaves back their dignity and their agency. Probably the most important of these was Eugene D. Genovese, a Marxist from the University of Rochester, whose "Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made" (1974) portrayed slavery as a complicated, paternalistic institution under which the slaves were able to build a rich society of their own. (In recent years, in an interesting plot twist, Genovese himself has moved to Atlanta and become a leading conservative within the academic world.)

"Soul by Soul" doesn't wage a frontal assault on Genovese, but it criticizes him obliquely in several places and seems to have been written partly as a corrective to his view of slavery. To focus on the slave market as the defining center of slavery, as Walter Johnson does, almost automatically puts slavery in the worst possible light, by making the element of outright ownership the central aspect of it. And yet Johnson is not merely returning to the stance of the liberal historians of the early civil-rights era. Slavery, in his account, was anything but simple. The slaves were constantly engaging in subtle forms of resistance: a slave imprisoned in a holding pen in New Orleans had some ability to get from other slaves information about prospective owners, and then to try to avoid falling into their hands—by proclaiming an unwillingness to work, for example. Owners, for their part, often went into the market hoping to execute a two-cushion shot by which acquiring human chattel would elevate them to the status of a lady or a gentleman. At least some slaveowners made themselves so insensate to the brutality of the system that they understood any reluctance on the part of the slaves as a manifestation of diseases (identified by a Louisiana doctor named Samuel Cartwright) called *Drapetomania* and *Dysthesia Ethiopica*. Of the antebellum South generally, out beyond the slave market, Johnson says, "The whole world must have seemed to throb with slavery." This is a late-in-the-book flight of peroration, but by that point Johnson, having inundated us with evidence of slavery's resonant horrors, has earned it.

New Orleans has always also been a center of the other leading form of flesh-peddling, prostitution. In fact, reading "Soul by Soul" makes it hard to assume the attitude that many have about the subject, which is a jaunty, high-spirited, bawdily celebratory one. The best-known body of work about New Orleans prostitution is a collection of early-twentieth-century photographs that E. J. Bellocq took in Storyville—the short-lived legal red-light district that existed for two decades before the First World War—and these images are honest and direct enough to communicate sadness. But "The Last Madam: A Life in the New Orleans Underworld" (Faber & Faber; $25), by Christine Wiltz, a New Orleans novelist, tries to hit the mark of fabulousness. No semiotics of the body, no monetizing of intimacy in this account—just good dirty fun, at least in the early going. This necessitates almost a willed refusal to acknowledge the exploitation inherent in the trade in physical relations between men who have money and women who don't. Every so often, Wiltz lets a detail through that gives the game away: a prostitute gets in trouble for complaining about a client who "always wanted her to go to the bathroom with him"; another has her nipples and her clitoris bitten off and is left hanging on a clothes hook. It's apposite that in the whorehouse where much of the book is set the passageway the girls have to duck into every time there is a police raid originally led to a slave dungeon.

The "last madam" of the title is Norma Wallace, who was evidently the city's leading purveyor of sex in the post-Storyville era. Wallace committed suicide in 1974. For a couple of years before that, she tried to leaven a miserable retirement by dictating an autobiography into a tape recorder. Somehow, these tapes came into Wiltz's hands, and she has used them as the basis of a biography that functions also as a history of the sporting life in New Orleans over the long stretch from the twenties to the seventies. Wallace, born in 1901 in Mississippi, spent part of her childhood in New Orleans, became a prostitute during her early teens in Memphis, and returned to New Orleans in 1916. Her timing was fortunate: Storyville was shut down by the United States Navy in 1917, which meant that the sex business had to relocate across Rampart Street, to a section of the French Quarter known as the Tango Belt, and also that it was open to new players. By the early twenties, Wallace had an establishment of her own, populated strictly by girls of "the highest moral caliber."

Wallace played an endless game of cat and mouse with the local authorities—members of the police and, more broadly, New Orleans' political officialdom and forces of civic betterment. It helped that many of them were her friends, her customers, the recipients of envelopes of cash from her, or all three. Robert Maestri, the mayor of New Orleans during the late thirties and early forties, owned a furniture store whose customers included the proprietors of the local brothels; the understanding was that they would pay an enormous markup "that went directly to police protection." Maestri's successor, Chep Morrison, who'd been elected as a reformer, once threatened to fire his own police superintendent for raiding a stag party at which he was a guest and the entertainment was pornographic movies confiscated in police raids. Earl Long "used to plan gubernatorial campaigns in Norma's kitchen." Jim Garrison appears in "The Last Madam" as the farthest thing from the crusading family man he was in Oliver Stone's movie; according to Wiltz, he both employed Wallace as a sexual procurer and took bribes from her, and his chief investigator, Pershing Gervais, was at various times a high-priced gigolo and the middleman in a murder-for-hire. The refusal to get hung up on the fine points of

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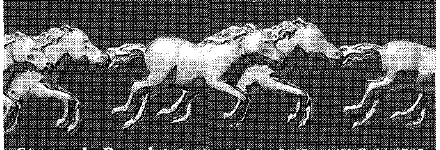

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obeying the law extended well down the chain of government authority. Even when Wallace shut down her house and moved to the suburban countryside, she operated under the protection of a local policeman who ran a cockfighting business on the side.

New Orleans used to have a racy, glamorous, quasi-showbiz subculture, a territory somewhere north of Damon Runyon and south of Walter Winchell. Norma Wallace, wisecracking and snazzily dressed, was one of the pillars of this little world. She had five husbands and many lovers. Long-forgotten night-club celebrities like Phil Harris and Don Ameche were part of her circle. Much of "The Last Madam" is made up of the kind of slightly too well-turned anecdotes that you imagine having been endlessly repeated, over cigarettes and Sazeracs in the Blue Room of the Roosevelt Hotel, to a procession of band-leaders and big-time gamblers who happened to be passing through town.

Then, about three-quarters of the way through the book, the tone darkens. At the age of fifty-three, we learn, Norma Wallace seduces a fourteen-year-old boy named Wayne Bernard, who a few years later becomes her final husband and a few years after that loses interest in her. Every appearance by Bernard sounds like the beginning of a dirty joke—he is a sexually superhuman stud but is sadly lacking in will power, and spends his life wandering innocently into complicated situations whose true nature he cannot grasp and in which the one given is that women will try to seduce him. Just to pick an example at random: "One afternoon Mr. Ard, who had taken care of the property when Norma and Wayne traveled . . . arrived in his pickup truck filled with his numerous daughters, all leggy, long-haired beauties wearing short-shorts and halters." But when Bernard finally leaves Wallace she sinks into the kind of depression that you can't climb out of.

Wallace and Wiltz together have an implied public-policy position on the state of New Orleans, or at least the French Quarter: they believe that generations of anti-vice campaigns have run off all the high-class establishments and left us with a depopulated district of sleazy ones. Wiltz notes elegiacally that in the Quarter today "cheap operations promote sex and pornography, and call girls, alone and vulnerable, work the streets, and houses like Norma's—opulent and protected places to conduct rites of passage—are gone." All true New Orleanians are nostalgists, so I guess she's excused, although, unlike her, I don't remember the old "exotic dancing" and "B-drinking" establishments as shining cities upon a hill. (B-drinking was a practice, which Jim Garrison tried to stamp out before he got onto the Kennedy assassination, in which a girl would come and sit next to you in a bar, rub your leg, and imply that if you bought her just one more ten-dollar champagne cocktail something really exciting was going to happen—but you always wound up passing out before you found out what it was.)

Norma Wallace may have lost her battle for the cause of the high-priced New Orleans cathouse, but her side won a larger war—the war over what the city really is. At the outset of her career, New Orleans was a commercial port, struggling to achieve a chamber-of-commerce prosperity that had previously eluded it. Now it's a tourist town—gaudy front, and you don't want to see what's behind it—in the process of orienting itself around a mammoth downtown casino. Just as the marginal and unsavory American carny culture ultimately wound up being superseded by a sleek entertainment industry that is its descendant, New Orleans' color, in an increasingly processed way, has become its meal ticket even as the most colorful places have disappeared. The old Bourbon Street is gone, of course, but so is a sense of all-encompassing civil welfare. The legacy of the slave market is an unbridgeable gulf in prosperity and in trust between the races. Robert Remini may have called it exactly wrong: after Andrew Jackson left town (to the relief, by the way, of his wife, Rachel, who described New Orleans as "Babylon-on-the-Mississippi"), the city embarked on a long steady journey not toward the plain American ethos of improvement but away from it. Now it's the northernmost outpost of the Caribbean. ♦

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BRIEFLY NOTED

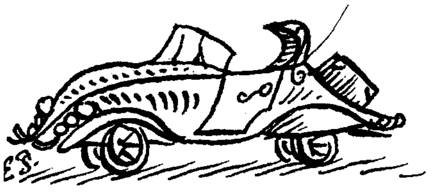
Gertrude and Claudius, *by John Updike (Knopf; $23).* Having exhausted the permutations of infidelity in contemporary New England, Updike turns to Shakespeare's "Hamlet," exploring the origin of Gertrude and Claudius' "reechy kisses." When the sixteen-year-old Gertrude is unwillingly betrothed to the elder Hamlet, Horwendil, by her father (the problem with Horwendil is that he's "unsubtle"), she quickly falls for his brother, Claudius. The two honorably resist their feelings until they are beset by the anxieties of aging; as it turns out, the murder of Horwendil is an act of emotional (and political) desperation rather than cold calculation. Likewise, Updike's portrayal of Gertrude and Claudius' thwarted affections is not just a deft literary exercise but an affecting—and funny—invocation of the abundant desires of what Hamlet called "this too too solid flesh."

A Member of the Family, *by Susan Merrell (HarperCollins; $25).* It's too clear from the start of this earnest first novel that the adoption of an emotionally deprived Romanian orphan is not going to work for the happy Lathams of Sag Harbor. The behavior of the boy, Michael, is horrifyingly bad; Deborah Latham is self-sacrificing and self-righteous; her husband is unfeeling; and their little girl is scared and unhappy. What are our responsibilities to our families and when is enough truly enough are real questions, but turning these pages is like watching a car go into a skid: the impulse is to avert your gaze.

Basil Street Blues, *by Michael Holroyd (Norton; $24.95).* This "vicarious autobiography" by a well-known biographer takes the form of a family history with Holroyd's parents as the main characters. Both were lifelong optimists, flitting glamorously from marriage to marriage, but both ended up alone, poor, and bewildered by misfortune. Holroyd's eye for absurd details (his parents disagreed even on the date of his birth) brightens and enriches a potentially bleak tale. He wryly describes how his vocation grew from an impulse to step from his own life into other people's, "where there seemed to be so much more going on."

Brotherhood in Rhythm: The Jazz Tap Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers, *by Constance Valis Hill (Oxford; $30).* Fayard and Harold Nicholas, arguably the greatest tap dancers in history, made their name at the Cotton Club in the thirties and went on to movies and stage shows. Hill's book, one of the few sustained analyses of tap, supplies the background—minstrelsy, "class" acts, swing—and, along the way, a history of American racism. (In Hollywood films, the brothers were usually confined to a self-contained segment so that they could be edited out in Southern movie houses.) It also tells a love story. Harold was only eleven when the brothers made their Cotton Club début; Fayard, eighteen, taught him how to shine. They did challenge dances, Fayard says, in order to focus Harold: "He would do it and look pretty, and I'd admire him doing it. Then I'd do my step, and he'd look at me." For more than fifty years, that dynamic gave their act its emotional fire, and it warms the book as well.

Stake: Selected Poems 1972-1992, *by Alfred Corn (Counterpoint; $26).* Like a journal kept in an exquisite hand, these poems from Alfred Corn's early collections revisit such haunts as the Quartier Latin and St. Mark's Place "in search of what it is that shaped / one witness's imagining of time." With retrospective glances, Corn follows his own story from the cliffs of the Pacific Northwest to the coast of Maine, always returning to his beloved Manhattan. In "A Call in the Midst of the Crowd," a rumination on New York City, Corn confronts "everything / Improvised, raw, temporary," while never abandoning his tutelary wit and decorum.



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THE ART WORLD

LESS IS BEAUTIFUL

A celebration of the well-tempered Minimalist Sol LeWitt.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Why does everybody love Sol LeWitt? It's strange, on the face of it. LeWitt is an artist of militant impersonality—a designer of sculptures that materialize out of rote mathematical permutations and of "wall drawings" that are realized by hands other than his own. He is a big name in Minimalism's mightily consequential first generation (along with Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre), which may be the most generally unloved cohort of aesthetic innovators in the history of art. Minimal art is notoriously formulaic and cool. LeWitt's work is all of that. But it is also clear, accessible, and generous. Like the Old Masters of classical music—Bach, especially—LeWitt illuminates the workings of his mind. He structures large understandings of perception and thought. If his art is without apparent emotion, that just leaves an inviting vacuum. Love rushes in.

So I was not surprised to be part of a euphoric crowd on the opening weekend of a big LeWitt retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (The show will close there on May 21st, then will travel to the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art and, finally, to the Whitney.) People wore the off-kilter smiles of those who have been paid surprise compliments: wariness lurching into gratitude. The show begins in the nineteen-fifties with studies of Old Master paintings. It proceeds through some awkwardly exploratory painting constructions, from the early sixties, to the abrupt maturity in 1965 of LeWitt's drastically simple sculptures of basic geometric forms—mostly frameworks in white-painted wood or steel, plunked on the floor. Soon, the first wall drawings appear: methodical schemes of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal pencil lines. Variations and complications ensue with the plodding logic of a workbook, in which occasional forward leaps suggest torn-out chapters. By the show's end, one strolls—or reels, rather—amid palatial glories of infectiously bizarre sculpture and gorgeously adorned walls. It's as if operations in elementary arithmetic had yielded a winning lottery number. The effect is droll and extremely grand.

LeWitt was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1928, received a traditional art education at Syracuse University, served in the Korean War, and settled in New York in 1953, during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism. He did layouts for *Seventeen* and drafting for I. M. Pei. The radically pragmatic early work of Jasper Johns excited him, as did a chance acquisition: an old book of serial photography by the then nearly forgotten documenter of trotting horses and the like, Eadweard Muybridge, whose bracing one-thing-after-another-ness obsessed him. These and other influences—they later included the Revolutionary-era Russian avant-garde—fed LeWitt's yen for a blunt, unironic aesthetic, freed of art-historical baggage and tasteful fuss. In the early sixties, LeWitt held minor jobs at the Museum of Modern Art. There he met the painters Robert Ryman and Robert Mangold and the sculptor Dan Flavin. Flavin, who would become famous for his laconic deployments of glowing fluorescent tubes, especially inspired LeWitt, goading him toward ever more audacious economies of idea and form.

I well remember the shock of Minimalism in its eureka years of 1965 and 1966. It was like being in a control room and seeing all the instruments and dials suddenly reset to zero. Style, sensibility, taste: none, none, none. As compensation, there came a visceral conviction of utter reality—actual space, heartbeat-measured time; it was like the dawn of a new world. Minimalism soon turned out to be not apocalyptic after all. It was just art, dependent on the very conventions of precious display that it disdained. The new, subtler gauges of young critics would detect nuance aplenty in its taci-

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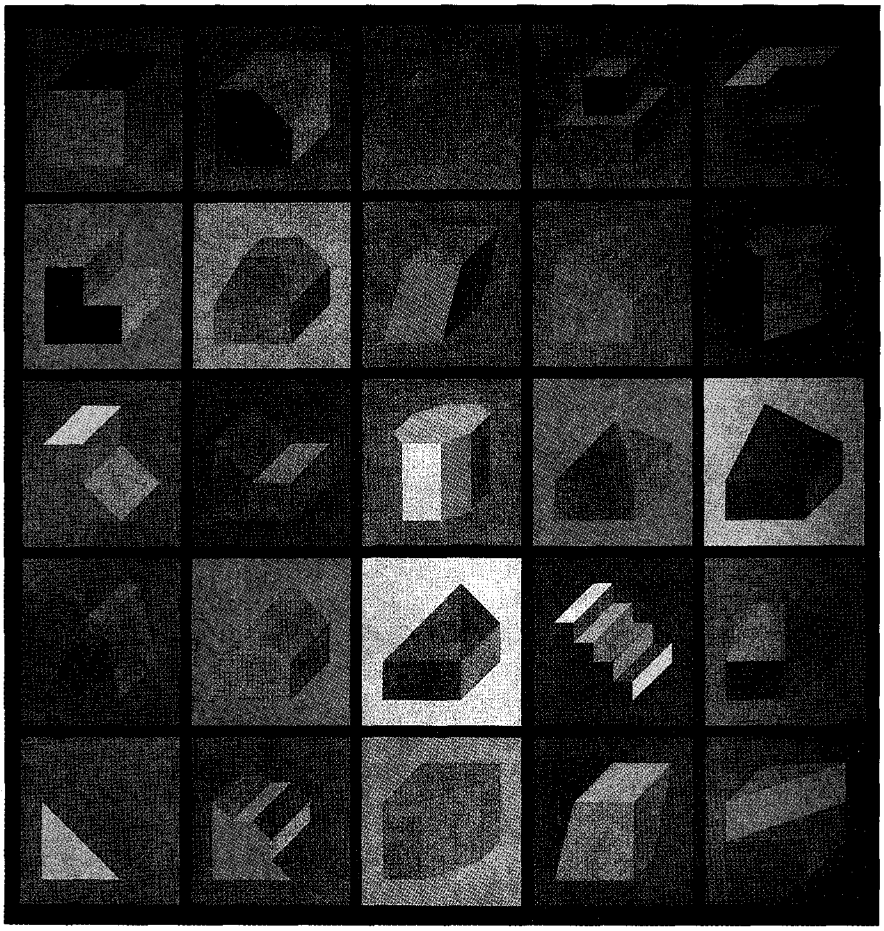
turn products. But a true revolution had occurred—one that shifted the focus of art experience from the created work to the self-conscious viewer.

LeWitt, who was always the most extreme of the Minimalists, extended self-consciousness to every phase of the art-making process, right down to the inky quick where human impulses to make anything begin. He presented each work as the equivalent of an arbitrary conception, carried out strictly according to plan. "Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically," he wrote in his evergreen 1969 manifesto, "Sentences on Conceptual Art," which may be the most concisely resonant and weirdly practical text of aesthetic philosophy since Aristotle. Another "sentence" declares, "The artist's will is secondary to the process he initiates from idea to completion. His willfulness may only be ego." Indeed, with LeWitt, something like an Eastern-religious selflessness combines with all-American, can-do snap and crackle—but definitely not Pop, let alone Dada. He disparages both the theatrical attitudes of Andy Warhol and the mandarin ironies of Marcel Duchamp. If the visual results seemed dry, that was fine with LeWitt. He reduced aesthetic pleasure to an exquisite balancing of thing and idea: perception shaking hands with thought.

For instance, in 1974 LeWitt addressed the possibilities of the cube: How many unique, implicitly cubic units, he asked himself, could be formed with less than the full complement of a cube's twelve edges? Experimenting with bent paper clips—rotating them to make sure that he wasn't repeating any shape—he found his answer: a hundred and twenty-two. He drew, constructed, and photographed the "Incomplete Open Cubes," which are on bristling display in San Francisco. Could a computer have helped him? He never uses one. "I don't want to deal with ideas too complex for me to figure out myself," he said in a recent public talk. The limitations as well as the capacities of native human intelligence are crucial to his project, which often puts observers in mind of Buster Keaton. LeWitt's modestly brainy expedients have that comical air of transparent, plucky ingenuity.



LeWitt's "Wall Drawing #601, Forms Derived from a Cube (25 Variations)," 1989: The unexpected grandeur of impersonal art that is rigorously centered in the mind.

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LeWitt's wall drawings belong in a hall of fame for parsimonious, incredibly potent inventions, like the lever and the wheel. He has made nearly a thousand of them by now. The making entails various formulas for marking a wall of any size. For example, "A wall is divided horizontally into two equal parts. Top: Alternating horizontal black and white 8" (20cm) bands. Bottom: Alternating vertical black and white 8" (20 cm) bands." This recipe yields a wainscot of black bars below and a stack of black barriers above. As with sheet music, anyone might perform it anywhere. But, like many a composer, LeWitt has his favorite interpreters—in his case, a flying squad of assistants who are on call to supervise installations. The look of a particular installation is determined by the size and texture of a given wall, and by the vagaries of the hands that execute it. As one might expect, the wall drawings in San Francisco are marvels of dedicated, exacting, lyrical toil. Two vast orchestrations of colored bands and arcs will remain as permanent features of the museum's entrance hall. All the rest will be painted out when the show ends.

It isn't just the physical scale of a museum wall that LeWitt's elegantly adaptable art matches, but the social and spiritual scale of our relations with museums themselves. What do we want and get from art institutions? Are they quasi-religious facilities—launching pads for exaltation, car washes for the soul? Or are they civic utilities—educational theme parks, party places for this or that alleged élite?

LeWitt's work countenances every possibility while remaining rigorously uncommitted to any single one. By keeping art explicitly centered in the mind, he casts the whole panoply of public culture in a contingent, provisional light. His art belongs directly to the viewer. Musicians say that Bach is still essentially Bach, when played on any kind of instrument—even when whistled in the shower. LeWitt would still be essentially LeWitt if you executed one of his wall drawings in your bathroom. In its rule-bound obduracy, his art is infinitely free. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

HUSTLES

Outer-borough boys and humanoids on the make.

BY DAVID DENBY

Giovanni Ribisi as a trainee broker in Ben Younger's "Boiler Room."

ANDREA VENTURA

"Boiler Room," the sensationally entertaining new movie about greed and corruption in the stock market, is paced at the speed of money—the tempo of dollars rushing from seller to buyer, investor to entrepreneur, dealer to gambler. This small, furious, bluntly made picture takes its sense of urgency from some young ruffians at the periphery of the market—lower-middle-class boys in Canali suits who sell dubious-sounding stocks over the telephone to easily stimulated investors. Like Oliver Stone's "Wall Street" before it, "Boiler Room" might be described as an ambivalent love letter to the outrageous hustle and greed of the great American boom. It adores the shuck-and-jive of conquering salesmanship; it is also nauseated by it. The movie was written and directed by the twenty-seven-year-old Ben Younger (it's his first film), and the way Younger tells it the exhilaration of making and spending big money quickly bubbles over into scams and swindles—a vicious froth of still more easily made money. Younger's hero, Seth Davis (Giovanni Ribisi), a Queens College dropout, knows that New York is fuelled by cash; he wants to find a way to get on the bus before it passes him by. Seth runs a little casino at home in Queens, but that's just small-time stuff. He shows up as a trainee at J. T. Marlin, a tumultuous third-rate brokerage housed in a black glass industrial building out by Exit 53 on the Long Island Expressway. As soon as he sees the intensity of the telephone activity—the brokers badgering, seducing, and scamming the clients—he's hooked.

Ben Younger treats investment and business as the pop culture of the current moment: for these Italian and Jewish outer-borough boys, making money is what disco dancing was for Travolta's Tony Manero in "Saturday Night Fever"—something far more powerful than sex. In college, at CUNY, Younger performed as a standup comic, and he brings a performer's jabbing rhythm to the material. He uses a rap score and a restless, jump-ahead cutting style, and he pitches the business scenes as fast as comprehensibility will allow. Much of the writing is cruelly witty: the salesmen who bully clients on the telephone are like hot-shot performers themselves, and when the men are at play, in bars or between calls, their competitive jockeying has a taunting fervor. Younger, I think, means us to enjoy the gleeful exhibitionism and displays of prowess; he wants us to relish the sight of the doubting, hesitating investor reeled into the boat and separated from his cash. At the same time, he wants us to see the brokers' triumphs as a low-life rampage. He's impressed, but he has no illusions; he shows us one of the victims of a J. T. Marlin stock scam, a Midwestern householder—a nice guy, but not too swift—and the dismal sight brings us back to earth. Amused, clear-eyed, and objective, "Boiler Room" has been made without false piety or hypocrisy.

In a rush, Younger brings on a blistering, satanic figure, a twenty-seven-year-old senior recruiter and ideologue of wealth (Ben Affleck), who delivers a series of harangues to the trainees at J. T. Marlin. Affleck utters a sentence that may become as emblematic of this period as Michael Douglas's "Greed is good" (from "Wall Street") was of the Reaganite eighties. "Anyone who tells you that money is the root of evil," Affleck says to the young recruits, "doesn't fucking have any." There may be some malicious truth in this observation, but it's also a vile remark—the recruiter thinks that no one but a loser or a hypocrite could object to what the stockbrokers do. The movie gives us good reason to object. Money has only made these young men barbaric. Many of the regular brokers, who are no more than twenty-three or twenty-four years old, drive Ferraris or Lexus S.U.V.s and live in large houses, which they don't know how to furnish. (Younger stages a travelling shot through a bizarrely underdone mansion, with crates and odd pieces of art furniture lying around like museum mummies—the shot is a comic classic in itself.) The boys are so noisy and combative that they can't go into Manhattan without getting into fights with Waspy brokers from J. P. Morgan or making fools of themselves in upscale restaurants. They aren't very different from young hoods, and they know it. As Seth, Giovanni Ribisi, with his slicked-back hair, dark clothes, and pale, pale face, looks, at times, like a baby pimp. Ribisi, who may be best known for his work as the medic in "Saving Private Ryan," also bears a passing resemblance to the silent-movie comic Harry Langdon, who could appear impishly decadent or innocent at will. Ribisi's small features are amazingly expressive. He's a skillful, touching actor—maybe a great actor.

Seth is estranged from his father, a disapproving federal judge (Ron Rifkin), and he is pulled this way and that by his emotions. He wants to please his father, but, Younger suggests, he harbors so much resentment that at some level he wants to destroy his dad, too. He breaks the law, putting his father's career in jeopardy, and then suffers when his father annihilates him with contempt. In the scenes between Rifkin and Ribisi, the director slows down his tempo; he keeps the camera still and trusts his actors. Rifkin, an actor I've made the mistake of taking for granted in the past, gives an extraordinarily quiet and concentrated performance. His judge is so intent on not fooling around, on getting to the point of things quickly, that he's almost a prig; he's overfocussed on doing the right thing, and he won't cut his son any slack, even when Seth wants to appease him. Younger has his own conflict: he appears to be torn between his desire to entertain, which suggests the influence of David Mamet's "Glengarry Glen Ross," as well as of "Wall Street," and his desire to make a morality tale and generate wrenching father-son conflicts, which he gets, I guess, from Arthur Miller. I prefer the harshly comic Stone/Mamet side of his temperament, but the Millerish scenes are so incisively written and played that they push past banal Freudian melodrama.

It's not that Ben Younger doesn't make mistakes: the F.B.I. characters who lay a trap for Seth are wooden; the struggle within Seth between integrity and greed gets resolved too quickly and too easily; and just when the movie should be coming to a satisfying climax it stops—it's as if Younger had run out of film. We miss a big scene or two at the end in which Seth, after talking to the Feds, would face the young guys he's been working with. But at least Younger leaves us wanting more. Unlike a great many other young directors, he appears to have something on his mind—the hunger and guilt that draw people together. Younger catches his characters at the moment of desire, and he catches us at the same moment. "Boiler Room," which burns with money fever, mirrors the lust and shame that many of us feel in our swollen prosperity. Not coincidentally, it's also the first fully alive movie of the millennium.

In "What Planet Are You From?" Garry Shandling plays a humanoid from an all-male colony in outer space. His task: to impregnate an earthling and thereby commence a population war against us. His equipment: a motor-driven vibrating penis that won't give up. Shandling has big soft lips, a red face, and a squelched, outrageously bland manner that allows him to say startlingly acid things as if they were entirely reasonable. His humanoid lands in Phoenix and meets up with a quivering ex-alcoholic plagued by low self-esteem—Annette Bening at her most soulful. These two are perfectly pleasant together, but they are trapped in an idea (Shandling's idea; Mike Nichols directed) that doesn't expand into much of anything. "What Planet Are You From?" is essentially a ten-minute TV skit that has been stretched out to full length and treated as if it were brilliant material for a comedy of manners. It isn't; the movie is thin and tepid. Shandling's point is that the blunders of the humanoid, who goes up to women and asks them if he can insert his member into them, are no more than an exaggeration of normal male behavior. All men come from a different planet: they never understand what women want. Perhaps not, but I'm not so sure that Nichols and Shandling understand what the movie audience wants. "What Planet Are You From?" offers a great many jokes about sex without itself being very sexual—it's a little dry, a little distant, and, after a while, as the mirthless jokes pile up and the vibrating whatsit is heard for the tenth time, the movie seems a smug and awfully safe way of talking dirty. ♦

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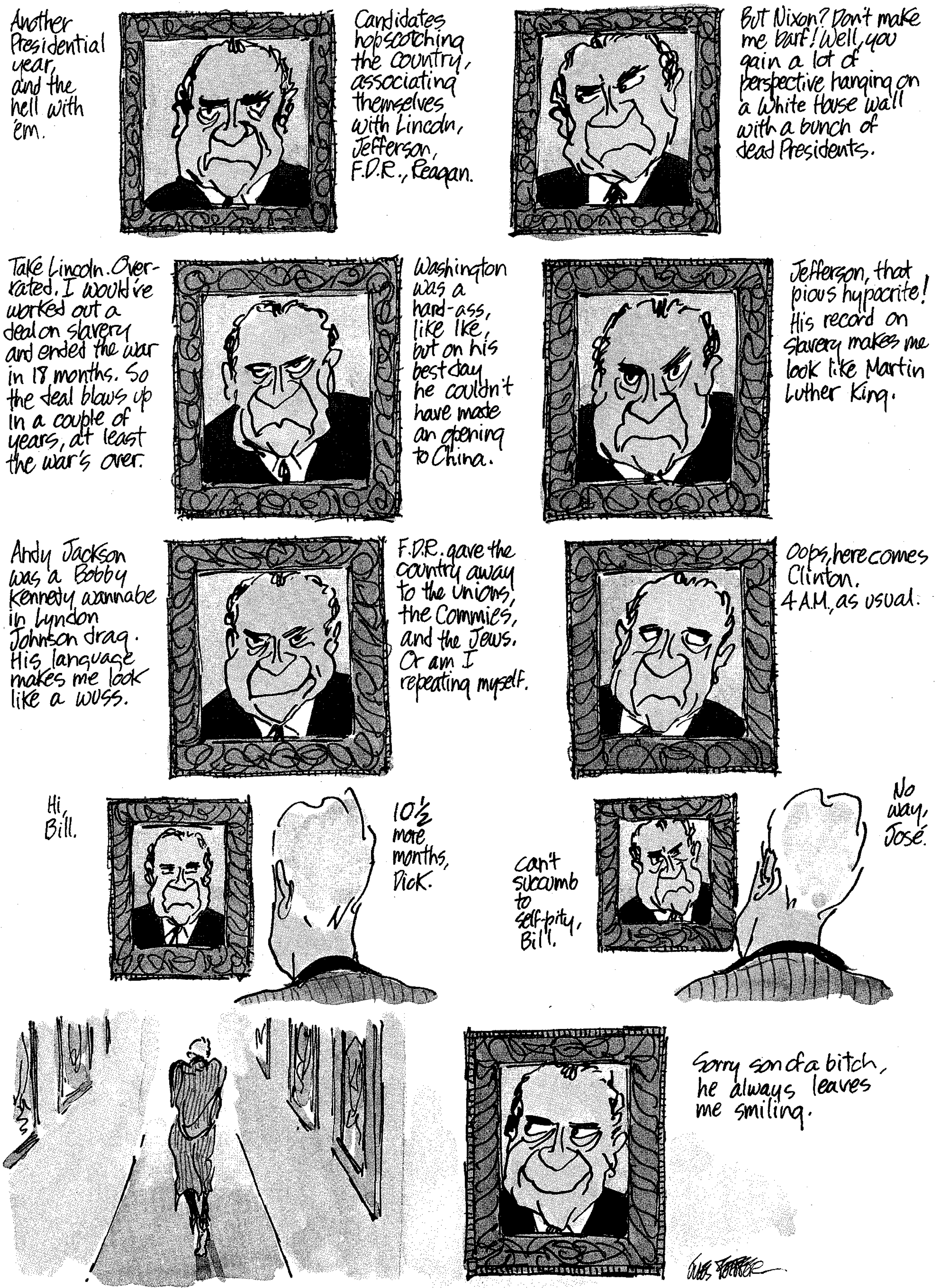
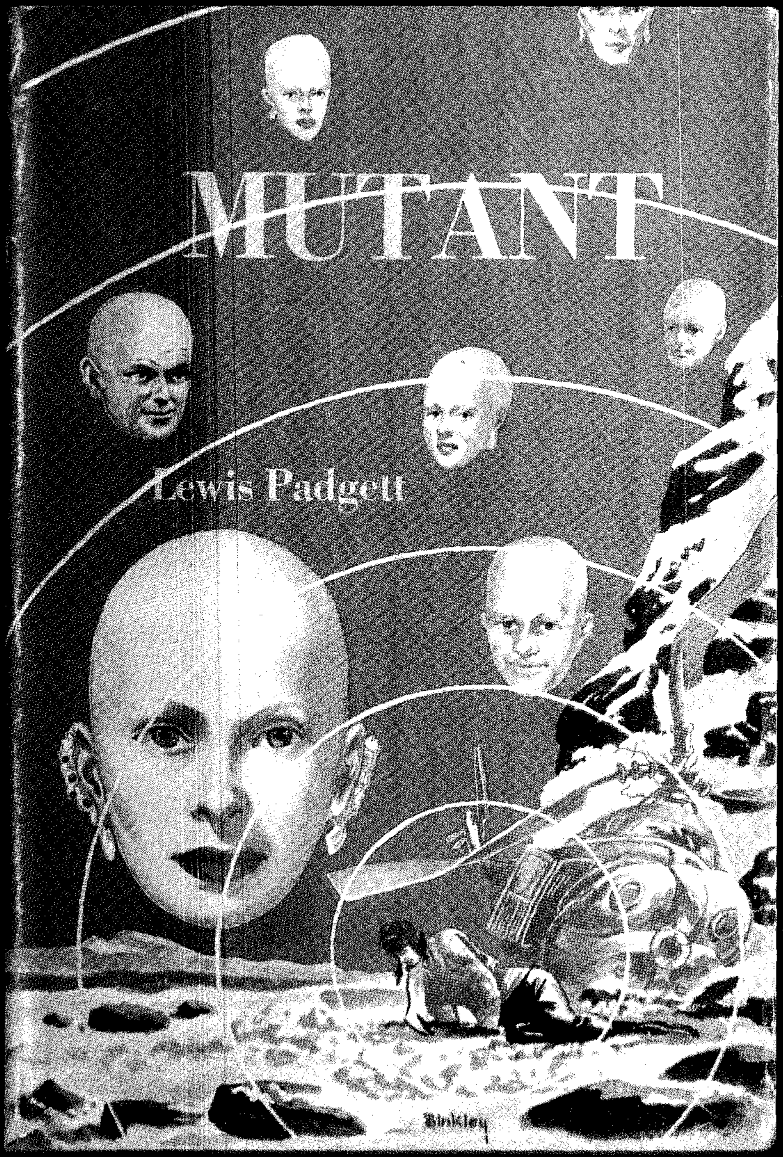

Another Presidential year, and the hell with 'em.
Candidates hopscotching the country, associating themselves with Lincoln, Jefferson, F.D.R., Reagan.
But Nixon? Don't make me barf! Well, you gain a lot of perspective hanging on a White House wall with a bunch of dead Presidents.
Take Lincoln. Overrated. I would've worked out a deal on slavery and ended the war in 18 months. So the deal blows up in a couple of years, at least the war's over.
Washington was a hard-ass, like Ike, but on his best day he couldn't have made an opening to China.
Jefferson, that pious hypocrite! His record on slavery makes me look like Martin Luther King.
Andy Jackson was a Bobby Kennedy wannabe in Lyndon Johnson drag. His language makes me look like a wuss.
F.D.R. gave the country away to the unions, the Commies, and the Jews. Or am I repeating myself.
Oops, here comes Clinton. 4 A.M., as usual.
Hi, Bill.
10½ more months, Dick.
Can't succumb to self-pity, Bill.
No way, José.
Sorry son of a bitch, he always leaves me smiling.
Jules Feiffer

April 11, 1977. Freaked you out so bad you had to bury it.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